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The divine minstrels

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THE DIVINE
MINSTRELS



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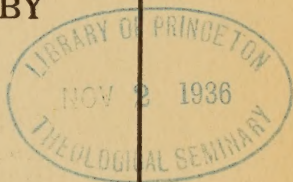


S. Francis of Assisi
after the painting by Gerard David (1523)
now in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin.

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Francesco d'Assisi, Saint, 1182-1226

THE DIVINE MINSTRELS

A NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF
SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI WITH
HIS COMPANIONS: BY AUGUSTE
BAILLY: TRANSLATED BY
ERNEST BARNES.



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“ Nos sumus joculatores Domini.”

(S. Francis.)

*“ La lor concordia, e i lor lieti sembianti,
Amore e maraviglia, e 'l dolce sguardo
Faceano esser cagion de' pensier santi.”*

(Dante. “ Il Paradiso,” Canto XI., 76-78.)

THE DIVINE MINSTRELS.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun was sinking behind the mountains, rose-coloured and peaceful. It was so huge that it seemed as though it would overbalance on the peaks of the Apennines, to rebound down their rocky sides and glide towards the plain in broad sheets of violet velvet light.

The heat had been great, almost oppressive. But with the twilight the influence which had weighed upon nature disappeared, and the earth revived, exhaling a cool scent. The olive trees, freed from the burden which so long had held them motionless, trembled in the evening breeze. Here and there a bird sang, and from the meadows surrounding La Rocca

there floated up to Assisi, through the limpid air, the long-drawn, gentle cry of a shepherd calling back his flock. The shadows deepened over the fields and gradually all colours, all contrasts were softened and blended in the merciful harmony of evening.

In the city, at the threshold of the gates the people were thronging together. Precious news had come in from Perugia: the fishermen of the lake had told it to the harvesters in the plain: at even when the labourers were returning to their homes, it had climbed the tracks, where the stones roll beneath the tread of naked feet: and now it crept in, high and low, through Assisi, by the parallel roads which lie along the side of the mountains and across the slopes which join them. When it reached the square, where those of higher rank,

leaning against the columns of the old temple of Minerva, were discussing loudly their past and future feats of arms, the impetuous gestures at once were stilled, and every face was lit up by a vague hope, mingled with joy and incredulity.

“ Is it really true ?

“ Who said it ?

“ When was he seen ? . . . ”

The groups of talkers moved from the buildings towards the centre of the square : scattering for a moment they came together again, and swaying to and fro were suddenly swallowed up in a crowd where high and low were mingled indiscriminately. A child worn with fatigue, but quivering with joy, had rushed out from an alley, crying in the darkness :

“ I have seen him ! . . . I have seen him ! . . . He is at Portiuncula ! . . . ”

Then, drowning the various exclamations of the crowd, a single shout arose loud and continuous. Torches flamed in upstretched hands. Across the slopes and down the paths the whole population of Assisi streamed towards the plain in long dark winding columns ; their progress indicated here and there by the yellow flame of the torches and the waning cry :

“ Francis ! . . . Francis ! . . . Francis ! . . . ”

Already in the wooded plain, usually so silent, where the Tescio flows and where, small and low like a peasant's hut, stands the Chapel of St Mary of the Angels, a great noise as of people on the march arose from the thickets, from the black-ranged lines of the cypress trees, from the heavy dark-leaved holm-oaks and the pale fleecy olives.

It came from the men of all Umbria.

From Perugia, from Montefalco, from Spello, from Bettona, from Gubbio, from the less-known villages and shepherd hamlets, and from the cottages built in stone along the mountain sides, all were hastening towards Portiuncula. For these simple folk the humble chapel was the heart of the world. With unequal pace the matrons followed their husbands. Children ran on, as though to a festival. At last they were to see Francis Bernadoni, the merchant's son, of whose marvellous adventures all had heard: who had founded the order of the Minor Friars; who had recalled Umbria, Tuscany, even Rome itself to the observance of the Gospel, had spoken with the Pope and finally had departed for the Holy Land, a good knight armed only with a dauntless smile: thence, his eyes still dazzled by the suns of Palestine, he

had returned this autumn day to the rough but cherished country-side, where ten years earlier, in spite of clamour, of ridicule, and of hatred, he had espoused her whom he loved with a passionate devotion, my Lady Poverty.

Along the pathways, also, were hurrying the companions of the Saint, the men of the dark-brown clothing, Minor Friars, Lambs of Christ, Lovers of Poverty—by whatever name the people might call them—all were returning to the huts of Portiuncula, and all felt faint with joy at the thought of seeing the Master again.

The chapel stood in the centre of the forest, and round it stretched a vast open space where the Friars had built their huts with dead branches and mud. It was towards this spot that the ever-growing crowd was moving.

When all had arrived, and crossing the forest, had reached the clearing where the Friars lived, the restraint of a religious awe came over them, the singers were hushed, the enthusiasts became calm, and those who spoke, spoke in whispers. And when at length they perceived Francis standing erect and alone under a great tree, those near by withheld the shout that rose to their lips to kneel beneath his gaze, and over all that mass of men a boundless silence spread as in mighty waves—a silence which seemed to radiate from the up-lifted hands of the Master and to cover the earth.

CHAPTER II.

FOR a whole week, while Umbria still quivered with the joyous tremor which had passed over it on his return, the Poverello sought solitude, keeping apart from his brethren with a kind of gentle stubbornness, and meeting, by chance on his wanderings, only the fishermen of Lake Trasimene, the vine-dressers of the lowlands, and the shepherds of Subasio.

“How sad he is! . . . How tired he seems! . . .” said the younger among the Men of Poverty.

But Léon, Angelo, Egidio, and all those who had followed him from the beginning, refused to agree that the Master had changed. Elias, who knew the hearts of men, offered to explain this melancholy,

and the simple-minded believed him, who passed for one that was wise.

“Our brother thinks of his youth,” he said. “There is nought that weakens the soul like meditation on the past. Doubtless, seeing again his native land, he thinks of his father who formerly cursed him, of his mother who is no more, of his brothers who flatter but do not love him. But his sadness will not last. Our sister Clara will soften his heart. She has a balm for all our wounds.”

But, though the smile of the Poverello was always equally tender, he seemed to have lost the serenity of his youth.

There come to us in life days of trial, when ideas in confused masses surge through the mind. We have a kind of melancholy feeling—a feeling of mingled pain and hope deferred. We call with all

our inmost strength for a renewal of happiness, and for the coming of a new world where we may lie at ease and bask, even as a pool of water spreads itself out at hazard in the meadow, and warmed by the sun, evaporates in its light. But always an obscure feeling of sadness hangs over us. It may be the fear of unknown troubles yet to come. It may be the memory of past griefs, or the vague consciousness of how life has torn our dreams to pieces. The mind of Francis was traversing one of these troublous periods. He was concerned for the future of the Order. He feared that the Church would capture and enchain those vagabonds of the Divine Love, whom he had sent forth to sing to the wide world. He had doubts of himself. He doubted those to whose will he had submitted his thoughts. He was agitated, nervous, anxious.

He regained some confidence only when he stopped at Saint Damian.

Around the little church, where, so many years before, he had seen the Crucifix bend towards him, dwelt his Sisters, the companions of Clara, in the huts built for them by the Men of Poverty.

On the narrow terrace, seated by the side of her with whom he was united in bonds of purest spiritual love, he thought of the overflowing joy which formerly had welled from his heart over this the cradle of the Order. He recalled that night of youth, when despite the laws of men he had consecrated to God, amidst psalms and songs of triumph, the noble girl with the bright name, whose fidelity remained true as steel. When he approached her, by the pathway through the damp-smelling woods, the desire would come upon him

sometimes to sing again the songs of Provence learnt during his youth, to celebrate his Master in some fine canticle, and thus in truth to merit the title he had one day bestowed upon his brethren :

“ You are the Minstrels of God ! . . . ”

But a rough blow had snatched from his hands the administration of the Order.

By the will of the Pope a general chapter had been convoked. A Minister had been elected, before whom the Poverello had had to prostrate himself and vow obedience. As his companions sobbed and cried : “ Are we then orphans ? . . . ” he had raised himself and with joined hands cried out :

“ I return to Thee, O Lord, the family Thou didst entrust to me. I have no more the strength to guard it, O Jesus ! I hand it over to the ministers. But may they

be cursed in the Day of Judgment if by their carelessness or their example one single brother is lost ! . . .”

After he had abdicated, little by little his peace of mind returned. He was of those whom uncertainty depresses, and who triumph more easily over defeat than over anxiety. Thus he again began his journeys through Umbria. Quickly he persuaded himself that the past could be re-born, and that the free and joyous times of the first Apostolate would return, when their only temples were the fields, the forests, the mountains, and the dazzling shores of the Perugian lake.

CHAPTER III.

ONE day, about noon, the Poverello was coming down from a mountain hermitage to return to the cottage of Rivo Torto in the plain.

He followed the bed of a torrent where no drop of water glistened. Occasionally he slipped and stumbled as the stones rolled under his feet. But no shadow of trouble lay upon his heart. His large brown eyes were full of light. The long, pale, thin face, set in a deep black beard, seemed unacquainted with grief. His soul was full of happiness, and he sought not for its cause. Raising his eyes, he saw the eagles circling one above the other in the heights of heaven. Suddenly he stopped, and called to them with a voice that sounded in its clearness like a silver bell :

“ Oh, my brethren ! . . . How near you are to God ! . . . ”

Long he watched them until his dazzled eyes could see no more. Then he began to walk again ; but stumbled often, for everywhere he looked large purple suns appeared to bar his road.

As he reached the plain, a young girl, who seemed to have been waiting for him, came out from the clump of oaks which lay across his path. The Poverello passed by without seeing her. In a voice that trembled a little, she murmured :

“ My father ! . . . ”

As he turned, she threw herself at his feet and spoke hurriedly as though fearing interruption.

“ My father ! my father ! ” she said, “ you restore sight to the blind and make the lame walk. You have cured the

little child from Bettona of dropsy, and have raised the dead after four days. Help me, oh, my father ! For without you I am lost. Whatever you bid me, I will do."

Francis took the hands stretched out to him and raised the girl.

"If you kneel to the servant, what homage will you pay to the Master ? "

"The homage of my life," she answered softly. "Oh ! my father ! receive me into the Order ! I am so sad and so afflicted ! "

"But in the Order there are only those whose faces beam with joy ! " cried Francis.

And as she was silent, he smiled.

"And are you really so sad ? How old are you ? "

"Sixteen. . . ."

He smiled again. She noticed it and reddened.

"I am not a child," she murmured.
"In very truth, my master, my pain is real. I have only too much cause to weep! . . . Will you not believe me? . . . You pity the beasts of the fields and the grass that you tread down underfoot, will you not pity me? . . . Will you not hear me? . . ."

Then with a passionate outburst the Man of Assisi prostrated himself before the astonished girl, and with arms outstretched thrice touched the earth with his lips.

"Forgive me!" he said, "I have been unkind. I smiled at your grief instead of mingling my tears with yours. Oh, my sister! I will do penance and mortify my flesh until God is no longer angered against me. . . . But now, speak with confidence, if you still think me worthy to hear you."

"Master! . . . Oh! Master! . . ." stam-

mered the young girl. "You!—you whom they call the Saint! . . ."

"Call me your brother," replied the Poverello, "and tell me what has made you suffer."

And as he raised her he looked at her, and saw that she was beautiful.

Her slight, still childish figure was clothed in white silk. At her waist hung a velvet purse. Fair as a flower, she wore her brown hair divided in two equal tresses and bound under a fine gold net. She seemed indeed most sweet, though the glance of her dark eyes was strong and free and passionate. Her ringless hands were twirling a twig which she had just broken.

"You are a noble?" asked Francis with a little hesitation.

"Yes," she answered, "I am Simonetta of the Altoviti and my father is of Spoleto.

Perchance you know the feud that separates the Altoviti and the Starella. For many years our two houses have hated each other. Two years ago four of the Starella were passing, towards evening, through the Roman gate. My brother with several friends was trying a new horse just outside. The retinue of our enemies frightened the animal: he shied and my brother nearly fell. Thus a quarrel arose. All drew their swords. Three of the Starella were killed by my brother's companions. . . . But he . . . oh! Master! at the very thought my heart bleeds! They brought him back, his breast all pierced with wounds. He was white as a sheet and still breathing a little though with great difficulty. Almost immediately afterwards he died. One only of our enemies had survived, Orlando Starella. Our men could

not reach him, for he stood on the guard-post of the gate with his back to the wall ; and his great sword, red with blood, was so terrible that none dared attack him. He still lives, my father ! . . . He lives . . . and I. . . .”

“ You must forgive,” said Francis, “ you must forgive him. He is not the only offender, and your brother has been avenged only too well. Would you that I teach you to forget, and thus free your soul from the demon of revenge ? ”

“ I want your protection ! . . . I want you to save me from myself ! . . . ” cried Simonetta throwing herself at his feet. “ Oh ! the shame of it, my father ! A wicked angel has entered into my heart and soiled it. But you, who are a Saint, will cure me. Can you not understand ! . . . Can you not understand what I scarcely

dare to utter ! Orlando's hands are stained with my brother's blood. Orlando and I, we love each other ! . . . ”

She remained kneeling on the ground and wept bitterly.

Francis raised her tenderly. He spoke to her in a low voice as though fearing he might hurt her.

“ You must not despair, but must love your troubles. Give yourself up to God, Who weaves garments of sorrow for those whom He loves best. Be like the flame that brightens in the wind ! ”

“ You will protect me, my father ? . . . You will admit me to the Order ? ”

“ Yes ! come to us ! I am only a poor man, and if God has chosen me to make manifest at times His miracles, it is to show to the world that the vilest among men may become in His hands a strong

vessel. . . . My sister Clara is kind. Her voice is like the Virgin's. Her hands are white as an angel's. She will pray for you. God will hear her prayers. Through her He will cure you."

Until evening, with words that seemed like kisses, the Man of Assisi lulled the cares of the little wounded soul that trembled in his hands. When night was come, the Master and his companion continued their journey across the plain.

Above Assisi the moon had risen and shone with a brilliant light that lapped in purple bands the slopes of Subasio. Full and round and peaceful, it seemed like the glowing face of a peasant girl, when on a harvest evening love and youth hold sway.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN my Lord Favorino of the Altoviti heard of the intentions of his daughter, he was wild with rage, and determined at once to go and burn down the huts of Portiuncula, Saint Damian, Rivo Torto, “and all the other dens of this accursed brood.”

The Bishop of Assisi tried to calm him.

“My Lord,” replied Favorino, “when you are troubled with lice, you destroy them, and I do not hinder you. Leave me to act in my own fashion and pray for me! . . .”

But when he learnt that Simonetta had taken this decision in order to stifle the mad love that was in her heart, he suddenly changed his mind, and after well nigh

bursting with anger and astonishment, cried out :

“ Let her then go to the devil and may the plague take her Orlando, unless he wishes me to sheathe my sword in his entrails ! . . . ”

Thus it was that my Lady Simonetta of the Altoviti became a novice in the Order of the Minor Friars, and lived under the clear shadow that the purity of Sister Clara caused to spread over Umbria.

CHAPTER V.

ON two occasions at this period the Poverello uttered passionate denunciations of the new spirit which was stealing into the Order.

There lived at that time among the Friars a brother, by name Masseo, whose keen and vigorous eloquence appealed more to the learned men of Bologna and to the Roman abbots than to the peasants of Umbria. One day when he had preached in front of the Cathedral of Assisi with more than his customary learning and brilliance, he returned to Portiuncula : and among the Poor of God he seemed distraught and absent-minded, listening perhaps to the echo of the fine words he had uttered. Suddenly the voice of the Poverello came to him :

“Masseo, my brother, a thought has come to me regarding you! Our companions have received from God the gift of contemplation and of prayer; you have received the gift of eloquence and your voice is pleasing to men. But as prayer is above everything, I wish your brethren to be free to consecrate themselves wholly to it, and henceforward your charge shall be to watch at the outer gate and to prepare the food; and when our brethren eat, you will eat outside the gate and watch so that no one of them may be disturbed in his contemplation. You will do this in the name of Holy Obedience.”

And Masseo drew his hood over his head and silenced for ever the strong melodious voice with which he had charmed the world: he obeyed the orders of the Master.

Again it happened a short time after-

wards that a novice who could read the *Psalter* obtained permission from the Minister-General to procure one. But he knew that to Francis the very idea of knowledge or learning was hateful, and that the brethren were not allowed to possess books.

He therefore went to seek him.

“My father,” he said, “it would be a cause of great joy to me to have a *Psalter*. But, although our Minister-General has agreed to it, I will not have it unless you too consent.

The eyes of the Man of Assisi flashed in anger. Drawing himself up, he answered almost fiercely :

“The Emperor Charlemagne, Roland and Oliver, and all the paladins and the knights who in battle showed their valour, pursued the infidels, and shed their blood

unto death—*they* were conquerors and heroes. And the martyrs who died for their faith—*they* are those who have earned the Grace of God. But to-day you confine yourselves to reading and recounting the feats of others and you think thereby to gain the praise of the world. You recite in the churches the deeds of the Saints and you look to obtain by your learning the glory that they bought with their heart's blood."

The novice bowed, trembling, and departed, his heart heavy to have grieved the Master. After some days, one evening when Francis was warming himself before the great fire of brushwood, he returned.

"My father, I would speak to you again about my *Psalter*," he said timidly.

Francis regarded him with passionate sadness :

“But when you have the *Psalter* you will want a breviary? When you have a breviary you will want a throne like a prelate, and despising your brethren will say, without deigning even to look at them, ‘Bring me my book! . . .’”

As he spoke Francis took a handful of ashes from the hearth, and scattering them repeatedly over the head of the novice cried out:

“This is your breviary! . . . There is no other!”

The novice stood motionless, his hands clasped, his eyes filled with tears. Francis regarded him with increasing tenderness, and his heart melted in sadness.

“Poor child of mine,” he said at length, “I also have sometimes been tempted to possess books. To know the will of God on this matter I took the Gospel and

opening the book I found these words :
‘ Unto you it is given to know the Kingdom
of God ; but to others in parables ! . . . ’
Do you not understand, my brother ? The
wise are so numerous that happy indeed
are they who remain ignorant for the love
of God ! . . . ”

There was a long silence. The novice
stood with clasped hands. Feelings of fear
and grief and rebellion coursed through
that tormented heart, and the Poverello
felt their echo in his own. For a moment
pity gained the upper hand.

“ Ah well,” he said, “ go. Go and do what
the Minister permits.”

The young man bent himself in rever-
ence and turned away. But he had scarcely
moved a few paces when Francis called him
back :

“ My brother ! my brother ! ” he said

passionately, "come back ! come ! It is here that I have allowed you to possess a breviary. . . . It is here that I shall do penance ! . . ."

And kneeling abruptly before the novice he beat his breast with his closed fists and cried :

"*Mea culpa ! . . . Mea culpa !* Who-soever wishes to be a Minor Friar let him possess only the tunic, the cord, and the sandals ! . . . Forgive me, my brother, and may God pardon me if, out of pity for your sadness, I almost deceived you."

This was the most violent protest of the Poverello : his voice was meant only for love, and, upbraiding wearied it.

He soon renounced the strife, and to the monks who obeyed the clergy he became no more than the Saint adored of the people, whose every smile produced a

miracle and whose soul, in the dream which it had conceived but could not realise, became day by day more solitary and more pure.

CHAPTER VI.

IN this dry and russet autumn-tide Francis delighted to wander in the solitudes which his youth had loved, and which henceforth he peopled with many-sided memories of the past.

Except on the cypresses and the holm-oaks no trace of green remained. In the dry bed of the Tescio the dust lay thick in chalky whiteness on the rocks. The grape harvest was ended, and stripped of their leaves and fruit, the vines hung red from the red elms. Alone in this changed landscape, where the earth cracked under the baking sun, the hermitage of the Carceri filled a gorge of Subasio with its deep shining verdure.

Occasionally Francis would leave Por-

tiuncula and pass the night at Assisi. He would set out on his return before dawn, passing through the St. Antony gate and striking into a pathway that meanders along the mountain side between the boulders and under great trees.

He looked not to the left where rose the rude Apennines, but to his right, across the abyss of darkness, he could faintly discern the heights of Umbria. When the moon was bright he could even make out the plain. With the emotion of a sovereign contemplating his empire, he would regard the walls of Gubbio, of Bevagna, and of Montefalco perched on their sharp peaks. They were alike, for men of the same race had built them all. They seemed higher or lower as the city spread downwards towards the plain, or mounted upwards towards the heights, and they were deeply

crenellated and divided by towers. Sometimes the Poverello would feel a thrill of pride at the thought that those great stone enclosures were sheltered in his frail heart. Then in sudden revulsion of feeling he would throw himself on the ground and cry :

“ Pardon me, O Lord ! I am the meanest of Thy creatures ! How can I serve Thee ? Destroy me, O God, for my foolish vanity ! I am the hammer with which the workman builds a church, and lo ! the hammer flatters itself that it has done the Master’s work !—Chastise me, O Lord ! Tear me asunder and pour out my blood ! How may I become worthy to be the instrument of Thy hand ? ”

His deep cries were lost in the noise of the wind, but the eagles, floating in endless spirals in the vault of heaven, could see,

crushed in the dust of the footpath, the Poor Man of Assisi calling to his God.

Then, as he continued his journey along the stony road, stumbling occasionally, in the shadow of the rocks and of the oaks, the dawn would appear on the horizon, and Umbria rising from the depths of night would be plainly visible. Then he could recognise the buildings of Castelnuevo, of Tor d'Andrea, and of Bettona in the distance. At last, at sunrise, he would reach the Carceri.

In a deep and narrow gorge, quite unexpectedly a forest raised its huge trees against the mountain side. From a distance it seemed a confused mass of cypresses, pines, and holm-oaks, suspended between earth and heaven. The men of the plains feared somewhat these ravines of Subasio where the sun never penetrated ; but in that solitude, where the only sound was of

running waters or the strife of winds, Francis, remote from his fellows, belonged wholly to his dream, and could talk more easily with God.

Stretched in a hollow of the rocks, he would place his head on the bare stone and dream. He would think of his mother who had loved him, of his father who had driven him away. He recalled his youth ; he saw himself again a brilliant cavalier clothed in velvet and gold, handling the madrigal and the sword, greedy for battle, and smitten with love. Then came the war with Perugia and the long imprisonment during which he had begun to know his own soul. Then the dreams, the visions, the voices ; the humble chapel of Saint Damian which he had sworn to rebuild, where the Crucifix had bent towards him ; the sudden call, the hatred immediately

aroused, the clamorous anger, the pent-up violence. Ah ! days of joy and terror, of revelation and of dread, a mother's tears, a father's fury ! And when at length denied, insulted, driven forth under showers of stones, he had nought else to live for but his divine mission, what bitter comfort to feel no longer an attachment to the earth, what cruel sweetness to have no more a relative or a friend !

But then, like seed scattered by the sower, events had shaped themselves in the hands of God. The Order was founded. Each day new brethren came to him. The rich stripped themselves of their wealth to secure the unrivalled treasure of Poverty, the maiden so inexorable and yet so kind. The poor came to embrace her with a burning love. A harvest of tenderness ripened under the Umbrian sun.

Then came the purest gem of the Franciscan crown ; Clara of Assisi entered the Order. Nor threats, nor violence could prevail against her will. The naked swords trembled before the lily in her hand.

After her came the band of Sisters, tender-hearted but brave, who brought to Holy Poverty the simplicity of their hearts and the light of their eyes : Beatrice, Amata, Agnes of Assisi, Agnes of Spello, Agnes of Cortona, and Sister Balbina, and Sister Benedetta, and Sister Francesca, and, dazzled with visions, Sister Illuminata ! . . .

Then followed the years of preaching, one long, unchanging springtime ; a scent of roses, a thrill of brightness, songs along the road, a harvest of miracles. The only weapon of the men of the dark-brown clothing is a cross of olive-wood : they sing, they laugh, they work. The world welcomes them to

listen to the melodies they utter, for they are the Minstrels of the deeds of God. . . . Then Palestine ! . . . and then, suddenly, darkness lit as by a flame. The Order bends before the Pontiff's throne. Convents receive the sons of Him Who had no place to lay His head. The heart of the Apostle shrinks. His work has remained bound to earth, while he mounts up towards heaven—too near to God, too far from men. . . . Take up again thy staff and start upon thy road, O merchant's son. Be again the pilgrim who goes from grange to grange to beg his bread and save the souls of men. Mayhap the future will recall to life the past !

CHAPTER VII.

ONE late autumn day on the little terrace of Saint Damian overlooking Umbria, Simonetta of the Altoviti sat at the feet of Sister Illuminata, the seer. The sisters had received her like a wounded child to be cured by love. Tender and discreet they surrounded her with an affection which insensibly gained her confidence. It appeared to the young girl that she lived as in a soft warm nest, and her grief gradually became less acute. She was never alone, for many of the companions of the Poverello had known what love is, and were well aware that solitude only too easily stocks the brain with memories of the past. Thus with the murmur of their voices they rocked this child-like soul to rest.

Among them all Illuminata was the most zealous and the most tender. It was with her that Simonetta passed the longest hours, it was from her she learnt to understand those whom she had chosen as the companions of her life.

The mountain heights were covered with early snow, but the sun had warmed the plain and a few green shrubs still showed themselves against the brown earth. The trees were bare. In the distance the branches of the olives stood out in fine tracery through the mist, and one could see the glitter of the Tescio between the fields. The sun was as though suspended in the height of heaven, and these last moments of autumn held an alluring sweetness to which even spring is sometimes a stranger.

Simonetta was wearing the brown robe

of the Sisters, the rope girdle, and the sandals that show the naked feet. In the rude simplicity of these garments she seemed fragile and almost a child—no longer a woman, but a small immaterial being whose soul trembled in the depth of her large dark eyes. Since she had been in the Order, she had tried to believe that she was happy. She tried with all her strength to drive away the proud image of him whom she had torn out of her life more easily than she could tear him from her heart. No one had ever seen her weep, but her eyes retained the glitter of her tears.

To strengthen her, without offending by direct preaching, Illuminata was recounting to her how Clara of Assisi had followed the Poverello, and had overcome all obstacles in order to realise her desire. To

the exact recital of the facts the prophetic sometimes added details from her own imagination which perhaps were truer than the facts themselves. She was telling how the illustrious family of the Scifi, whence Clara sprang, would live in the memory of men through the holiness of her whom they had cursed.

“However Ortolana of the Scifi was warned by a mysterious voice of the great destiny reserved for her child. When she still carried her in the womb, she heard these words, which penetrated to her inmost soul: ‘Fear nothing! thou shalt give to the world a bright light, before whose brightness the darkness shall fade away.’ And out of reverence for this voice from on high she called the child Clara. The day of the birth was a festival for Assisi. The whole city was in the

streets singing. The merchants and the masons shouted for joy without knowing why, and three ruffians who had long plundered travellers on the road from Perugia to Assisi came in and gave themselves up that same evening to the consuls. They had seen over the city a flaming crown, and the light had come to them! . . .”

Illuminata ceased speaking. She was living again in thought those wondrous hours. Simonetta watched her in silence. A cool breeze which had kept the freshness of the snows, yet seemed impregnated with sunshine, came down from the mountains.

“She must have been beautiful! She is still so beautiful and so young!” said Simonetta half aloud.

“Beautiful? yes indeed! and far more, far better than beautiful! Everything that one can imagine of sweetness, of

gentleness, of harmony, seemed to be born in her and to form her being. Her eyes were deep and clear like the waters of the Perugian lake, when on a spring-tide morning the scent of the flowers glides through the warm air. She smiled, and those who saw her smile wished to bow down before her, for they felt a joy so wonderful that their hearts were like to break. At the sound of her voice those who were in pain thanked God for their sufferings; and when she passed through the town, one felt as if there floated through the air a sense of peace, of pity, and of boundless hope.

“When she was sixteen and when throughout Assisi they spoke only of her glory and her charm, she refused the husband whom her father had chosen for her, and followed the Poverello.”

“ Ah ! she did not know what love meant ! ” cried Simonetta, clasping her hands.

Sister Illuminata allowed her astonished gaze to fall on the child seated at her feet. At last she said :

“ It was another love that filled the heart of Clara. She gave herself wholly to Him Who had given His life for men. What is an earthly betrothal compared to a heavenly spouse ? ”

Simonetta lowered her head. Her eyes were filled with tears, but she would not weep. A dear but dreaded memory rushed to her heart and she tried to drive it away. A silent prayer went up to God :

“ My God ! my God ! kill my thoughts within me ! . . . Give me the peace of forgetfulness ! . . . Make my heart even as a tomb, shut in under a heavy stone ! . . ”

As she called to mind the heroic times of the Order, Illuminata became transfigured. Her eyes, filled with the vision of her dreams, looked far beyond life. She forgot the girl whose love still bound her to the earth, and like a prophetess she described in rapid phrases the scenes which passed in quick procession through her brain.

“ It was the night of Palm Sunday. In silence and in darkness Clara had left her chamber to depart from her father’s castle. Rocks covered with devils barred her road. But what could black rocks avail against her will? She touched them and they crumbled away! . . . Across the open country, by steep paths, by precipices, and torrents on the mountain side, through forests where all tracks are lost . . . Clara walked on, guarded by angels. Suddenly there were lights ; the sound of songs came

through the trees, and a noise as of a great festival. . . . Astonished and smiling she stopped ; and there, advancing towards her, came the Master and his companions, carrying torches and singing : *Gloria in excelsis ! . . . Alleluia ! . . .* Then, before the altar of Portiuncula, the fair hair in which she could have wrapped herself fell to the ground in sheaves of gold. The brethren chanted : *Alleluia ! . . .* Their hymns of joy were heard at Perugia, at Spello, at Montefalco. The astonished citizens came out and stood at the gates, and that night they all saw in the heavens above Portiuncula a great white angel in his glory, who blessed Assisi. But after that night of triumph came tribulation : the shouts of the soldiers, insults, threats, violence, tears, and curses—all this Clara had to suffer. She had conquered devils ;

now she conquered men . . . O Clara ! our sister and our mother, light of our eyes, joy of our hearts, ah ! when will it be given to us to pour out our life's blood for thee in thankfulness to have lived under thy shadow ! . . .”

While speaking, Illuminata had risen and stretched out her arms towards the narrow line of cells. When she sat down again, her eyes seemed dazzled with the sunlight. She spoke no more, but only listened to the chanting of her dreams within her. Simonetta felt then her utter loneliness, and, under the cold wind from the mountains, fell back on her own thoughts. She saw her brother's bloody form, and erect on a guard-post, Orlando, pale and dishevelled, his red sword in his hand—so terrible that none dared strike him. With bowed head and hands clasped between her knees,

bending her will as she bent her body, she repeated with the obstinacy of despair :

“I do not love him ! . . . I do not love him ! . . .”

But behind the vain words the young man's image rose ever before her, his eyes wild with fury and love ; and her poor desperate soul trembled and groaned, storm-tossed, under the stress of passion.

CHAPTER VIII.

As the day had been fine and the sun had warmed the air, the Friars, at nightfall, left their low huts, where the roofs weighed upon their heads, and assembled round a great fire close to St. Mary of the Angels. In the spreading darkness the sky had remained blue, and seemed to fall in languor over the earth. From the plain it appeared to touch the summit of Subasio, wrapping the battlements of the citadel in its dim stillness. The stars, large and heavy, were like splashes of gold on a dark ground.

From the surrounding villages, by the pathways which traverse the forest and lead to Portiuncula, the Friars were hastening home. Joyously they returned to the

cradle of their faith, for night had come and in darkness their solitude bore more heavily upon them, since then they feared the sight of hell, the meeting with wicked angels, and the terror of unknown sins.

In front of the Church, near a huge fire, Francis with a few of his companions was seated on the ground. There were Bernardo, Léon, Egidio, Elias, Rufino ; Juniper too was there, poor innocent soul, huge of body and frail of mind, whom the Man of Assisi loved for his simplicity.

A light wind passed through the trees, and Francis began to cough. Juniper immediately coughed an equal number of times with equal force. Francis spat on the ground ; Juniper at once proceeded to spit in the same direction with the same noise. He held, indeed, that the actions of a perfect man, however insignificant

they might be, were all part of his sanctity, and that to attain one day to the glory of the model one must imitate every detail of his conduct. He followed the Poverello as in the sunshine our shadow follows us along a white wall; and indeed he resembled him as we resemble our shadow.

“Lo! we are twelve with Francis,” observed Bernardo suddenly. “He is, therefore, at this hour, the true exemplar of Jesus.”

The Poor Men clapped their hands and uttered cries of pleasure, gladdened by the thought. When silence was restored, Juniper in his turn began to laugh loudly: he had just understood, and felt a joy which had no limit; as he laughed, he raised his hands to heaven, then brought them down with a great noise to his sides. But to Francis there came, almost un-

consciously, one of those outbursts of humility which made him adored by all. He threw himself on the ground and with his hands clasped, cried :

“Bernardo, Bernardo, a devil has inspired you. You would tempt me with pride. But, with the help of God, I will not succumb!”

He stretched himself at full length on the ground, his arms outspread. With a loud voice he said :

“Bernardo ! In the name of Holy Obedience I command you to tread upon me. I command you to put your foot upon my head and trample me in the dust ; and you shall say, ‘Face to the earth, oh wretch ! . . . Face to the earth, thou merchant’s son ! . . . Whence comes thy pride ? . . . To earth ! to earth. . . .’ Bernardo, do as I command you. . . . Do as I command you ! . . .”

The Friars drew their hoods over their eyes, and thrice Bernardo, trembling, crushed with his feet the body of the Master. Then, his eyes full of tears, he fled away under a tree, while Francis, radiant with joy, resumed his place among his companions.

The fire burned clear and bright and threw out its heat afar. A sense of torpor spread over the Friars as they enjoyed the stillness of the night. The evening was mild and soft, and all things seemed imbued with tenderness.

Following the train of his thoughts, the Man of Assisi recalled the beginnings of the Order—the time when men used to say to him :

“ What would you do, you, who are neither merchant nor monk ? ”

When he would answer :

“ I am a knight ! Think not that for me alone upon the earth there is no love. I love a princess, marvellously pure and fair. In this world she has no lands, yet here I shall establish her empire. I have promised my Lady the fairest of all dowries ; I shall bring to her in both my hands the beating hearts of men ! ”

“ And what is thy fair friend’s name ? ” the honest folk would ask.

“ Poverty.”

They laughed. They did not understand.

“ He is loveable and gentle,” they would say. “ What a pity that he is mad ! ”

But suddenly an unbeliever, a mocker, a townsman would feel his heart touched by a strange weakness, would hear a voice whispering to him, in an unknown tongue, words as soft as death, would strip himself

of everything and go ! And the brown-clothed beggars would count among them another brother.

They were years indeed of youth and gaiety !

While thoughts such as these came to Francis seated among his motionless companions, the darkness of the night had completely overshadowed the world, and it seemed to the Friars, near their fire, as though they were shut in a warm room, the ceiling of which was studded with rosy suns. The Tescio rolled across the plain, with a monotonous murmur that did not break the silence. From Subasio the waters of the recent rains tumbled in miniature cascades.

Juniper was hungry and asked simply :

“ When shall we eat ? ”

“ Now ! ” said Francis. “ On this fine

table of rock and with this clear spring no kings are better served than we ! ”

While they were dividing the bread and cheese earned that day, Masseo came to tell the Master that a richly-dressed lord would see him, and was waiting for him behind the church, at the edge of the wood. Francis at once went to the spot. He had scarcely reached it when a young man came out of the coppice and advanced rapidly towards him. His eyes were burning with fever, his cheeks were sunk with grief or sickness, his whole appearance was proud, wild, and desperate :

“ It is you . . . the Saint ! . . . ” he said. “ You—you who have robbed me of the woman I love ! . . . Why should I not kill you ? . . . ”

Slowly he raised a dagger.

“ Orlando ! . . . Orlando ! . . . ” mur-

mured Francis. "I well knew that you would come!"

For a moment they stood face to face. That look, whose sweetness had overcome the world, played tenderly on the fierce visage of the young man. The lips so full of hate began to tremble, the flashing eyes grew dim with tears: then the raised arm was lowered, the dagger fell to the ground, and with a sob the youth turned back across the forest and the night.

With slow steps Francis returned to his place by the fire.

"Who was it?" asked Egidio.

"One of our brethren!" answered the Master.

CHAPTER IX.

SEVERAL times during the winter Orlando Starella came down from Assisi to St. Damian, where the Poor Ladies lived under the guard of a few Friars. He arrived usually at nightfall: during the day he had the strength to control his desire. But at the hour when the shadows fall over the earth his courage vanished with the light. She whom he loved appeared to him in the silken veil she was wont to wear, with a thread of gold in her gold-brown tresses, and a ruby on her forehead. He felt that she loved him, and that it was to fly from love that she had taken refuge in that little house upon the plain, surrounded by the trees. She lived there, wearing the rough cloth robe, the cord and

the sandals. She lived there. If he could penetrate within the inner court or reach the chapel, he would doubtless see her, pale in her sombre garments. He would throw himself at her knees and stop her with outstretched arms, and cry to her :

“ Simonetta ! Simonetta ! . . . It is I. . . .”

She would be frightened and would draw back. She would try to run away but would not be able. With a sob that would be a cry of joy she would answer :

“ Orlando ! . . . Orlando ! . . .”

And then he would seize her in his arms and carry her away across the forest, across the snow and across the rocks ; and, his heart burning with joy, he would keep, clasped tight in his arms, the prize of which no one should ever again deprive him.

Such were the dreams that drew him, in spite of himself, towards the plain. He waited till the evening before descending. His heart beat loudly. Furtive and anxious, as though he were committing a crime, he wandered among the trees that sheltered St. Damian. Sometimes a dry twig cracked under his feet: he would tremble and for long stand motionless in the freezing air. The swollen waters of the Tescio rolled loudly across the plain. Now and then, the foliage of the holm-oaks and the cypresses rustled in the wind with a murmur that was almost human. The moon shone coldly above the trees, and the stars appeared very distant in the darkened sky. The sound of singing from St. Damian reached him from time to time, and he could distinguish the voices of the Poor Ladies from the deeper tones of their guardians.

Orlando Starella imagined to himself the plain little church, all lighted with candles and rich in its atmosphere of love. He felt that his cries of despair could never prevail against those divine voices, and that an angel at the door would turn away with his hand all that was not purity and light. Sometimes, in a sudden access of fury, he thought to rush in and seize her whom he loved, and heedless of cries or prayers to carry her away. . . . But he did not dare.

Again the idea would come to stab himself to the heart with fierce blows of his dagger, so that they would find him at sunrise in the snow, pale and cold as a winter's dawn, and that thus Simonetta might know at least the violence of his love. But an unconquerable hope held back his hand: in some obscure way he had faith in his passion.

One night the Friars, returning across the forest to their home, saw him leaning against a tree and gazing with strained eyes towards the enclosure. When he saw that he was discovered he moved away without uttering a word, even in answer to the humble salutation addressed to him. Clara and Francis prayed for the peace of his soul, but the Sisters feared a love so terrible.

Then he disappeared. Some friends who were going to Provence persuaded him to accompany them. They extolled the sweetness of that land, so rich in consolation. He hoped that separation and the distance would kill his love, and so he exiled himself.

When they no longer saw his proud fierce figure wandering in the forest, the Poor Men forgot him. Only Clara at St. Damian, and Francis at Portiuncula,

awaited his return, the one with fear, the other with confidence ; the one doubtful whether he might not come to snatch away their sister, the other hoping that one day he would unite himself to her in the mystic bond of the Franciscan brotherhood.

CHAPTER X.

IT was spring-time. The almond trees were in flower, and the hills were covered with a silver mist that spread away into the distance and gradually merged itself in the light of the horizon.

In the meadows the jonquils and the violets had appeared, and light green buds showed that life was returning to the vines. The sun was soft and gentle as the smile of a friend who has dried his tears. From the higher hills the torrents poured down in tumultuous cascades, while between the box-trees, the olives, and the mulberries, the streamlets prattled unceasingly as they gaily jostled the pebbles against each other. Sometimes a lark would spring from the hollow of a furrow, and spurring

towards heaven enraptured with the light, pour out from his narrow throat a flood of song, clear as a running spring.

“ Oh ! Sister of the Minstrels ! ” said Francis, “ clad like us in earth-brown garments and living far from towns and human habitations, ever thou proclaimest the praise of God. Little lark, small dazzling being, sing always without ceasing, for thou rejoicest the wretched hearts of men ! ”

Like the beasts of the field, the Lovers of Divine Poverty left their huts of mud and straw at the first whisper of the spring.

“ The hour is come to take again to men the word of Christ,” had said the Man of Assisi.

And when the brethren asked him :

“ To what district shall we go ? ”

“ What matters it ! ” answered Francis.

“Go to the cross-roads : turn round and round until the forest turns with you ; then when you can see neither road nor footpath, set out to walk ! Where you go, there you will find God.”

From the hive where they had wintered the brown bees spread out over the world ; and straightway as the noise of their miracles reached her, the earth awoke refreshed.

Each day from the marches of Ancona, where several brethren were preaching, the merchants, mounted on their mules, brought in the news of some fresh wonder to Assisi. After mass in front of San Rufino, or during market time before the colonnade of Minerva, the people of the city in their simplicity discussed these matters.

“Do you know what we have heard about Brother Bentivoglio of San Severino ?

Masseo saw him raised in the air for a long time, while he prayed under a tree ; and neither his feet nor his hands touched the ground."

" That is nothing : Brother Lucido has received from the Lord a far greater mark of grace. He was serving a leper at Trevebonanti. The bishop, by our Lady, ordered him to pack off and be gone, to the devil if he pleased, with his leper. Lucido took the poor creature on his shoulders and set off at daybreak. A few moments later, as the sun was rising, he arrived, still carrying his leper, at Mount Sanicino, fifteen miles and more from Trevebonanti. An eagle could not have covered the distance so quickly ! What do you say to that miracle ?

" And Brother Peter of Monticello ! He had gone into the Cathedral of Ancona to

pray, and thought he was alone. But a novice had hid himself under the high altar to watch him during his meditation. And what do you think the rogue saw? Peter communing with Saint Michael the Archangel. ‘ Brother Peter,’ said the Archangel, ‘ thou hast borne for me so many burdens and so many troubles that thy body is worn out. I am grateful to thee, and now, as consolation, I have come to grant thee whatever grace thou mayest demand.’ To this Peter made answer with all courtesy, but without any embarrassment: ‘ Prince of the heavenly army! Faithful defender of the Divine honour! Pious protector of souls! All that I ask of thee is to obtain for me pardon for my sins.’ ‘ That is too easy,’ said the Archangel. Ask some other gift.’ But Peter of Monticello refused. ‘ What had he to do with gold or silver?’

On this Michael said to him : ‘ Since it is so, I grant thee that which thou hast asked.’ And he flew away and disappeared through the roof, where one could see no opening of any kind ! ”

There was silence in the crowd. A miracle of this kind was not common, and the people of Monticello considered themselves especially honoured in their compatriot. Even the cheese-sellers in their blue and red rags, and the shepherds, who in their clothing of skins look like bears, gravely nodded their heads with a sort of pious jealousy. Some nobles, who kept themselves apart to avoid the dirty evil-smelling crowd, meditated with all respect on what they had just heard. Only three or four urchins, who were fighting together, continued shouting as they rolled over each other in the dust. A bearded and much

bent old man, who carried a net on his shoulders, went and separated them with a few hearty kicks. Then he returned, pushing his way through the crowd.

“ Eight days ago,” he said, “ on the sea-shore at Rimini, I saw the most extraordinary wonder. Citizens, I am a fisherman by profession. My father was a fisherman, and with God’s help my children will be also. I have fourteen, and they work and console my old age. . . . Citizens, . . . ah ! . . . what was I saying ? . . . I am a fisherman ! Very well, no one knows better than I do the ways of the fish. I believe indeed they talk to each other, but I can assure you they do not understand the language of men. I have reared fish, citizens. I have fed them. I have always been full of goodwill towards them ; but never have I been able to make them

understand me or show me the least sign of gratitude. Well ! last week Brother Anthony of Padua, while passing through Rimini, preached to the fish of the sea and they heard his words ! . . . They listened to him, citizens ! . . . ”

Some of the bystanders thought fit to laugh ; but the old man got red in the face with anger. Stamping his foot on the ground, he shook his fist at the scoffers.

“ Dull fools, I tell you that they understood ! Will you listen ? I was there, behind the Friar. I had followed him, hoping that he would bring me good luck with my fishing. He went to the mouth of the river, and there, on the shore, he cried out : ‘ Listen to the Word of God, O fish of the sea and of the river.’ Almost immediately a multitude of fishes appeared. Never have I seen so many. They held

their heads out of the water and regarded Brother Anthony with much calmness, order, and gentleness. The smallest were near the shore, then the middle-sized ones, and farther away in the deep water swam the big ones. When they had all taken their places, Brother Anthony began to preach. I shall not recount to you in detail all that he said, as I am neither a bishop nor a scholar. Still I assure you I would not be far wrong if I did ; my father was a good talker and I too, God wot, can make myself heard. One of my sons also is very eloquent : by God's will, he shall be a parson, if he is not a fisherman ! Citizens, where was I ? Ah yes, Brother Anthony began to preach. He said : ' Oh my brother fishes ! you must, according to your means, give fervent thanks to our Lord, who has given you so noble an

element for a dwelling place. You have fresh and salt water, according to your tastes, and many places of refuge wherein to escape the storms. Your food is spread everywhere in the pure water. God has always favoured you. Remember that, at the Deluge, when all the other animals died, you alone did not suffer. Your fins carry you whither you please, and to you it was given to keep the prophet Jonah safe and sound, and to place him again upon the earth after three days. Thus you see that you are the favoured of God. Praise Him and bless Him for He has given more happiness to you than to others.' This was what Anthony said. And to show their satisfaction the fish opened their mouths and nodded their heads; by all the means in their power they gave praise unto the Lord! I was not the only one

to see this miracle, citizens. . . . Hundreds of men and women had come from Rimini. They all saw it, like myself. Indeed, we all knelt on the sand behind Anthony, as we did not wish to appear less devout than the fish of the sea. . . . Afterwards I had a good catch . . . and if any one doubts my words, may he become a leper ! . . .”

He had spoken with such fire that even the most incredulous were convinced. In little groups the crowd moved about the square and discussed the wonder. A great pride arose in the heart of Assisi, for Anthony was the friend of the Poverello ; but they envied Padua, which seemed to enjoy the special favour of God.

Every day news of fresh marvels came in from other parts of Italy. Francis had reached Tuscany. He wandered in those vales, where the delicate outline is saddened

by the dark cypresses, but softened by the fairy grace of the almond trees and the vines which hang in garlands from the elms. He preferred to stop in the villages, and worked in the fields with the country folk to earn the piece of bread which sufficed for his nourishment. Then he would talk of God as of a friend quite near. He would show His presence in the flowers, in the chant of the running water, in the breath of the wind upon the leaves, in the earth's puissant fruitfulness. Sometimes, during the hours of rest, he sang in a clear, sweet voice that seemed like the voice of the spring. The people adored him. Each smile of his brought peace and joy to some aching heart, and the poor folk in their piety would see therein a fresh miracle. From hamlet to hamlet the news of the wonder would spread through Italy. One

day it reached the plain below Assisi. At St. Damian it was as the salutation of the Master to the Sisters, the mysterious voice which traverses space, the presence of the absent one. Thence it mounted by the steep road to Assisi all white on the green mountain-side. In the square, in front of the Church, it ran from mouth to mouth, joyous as a story sung by the troubadours of a knight-errant and his feats of arms.

“ He has fasted for twenty days, and has not ceased to commune with God !

“ A child saw him, speaking with Christ. They are of the same height, and like as two twins, but Christ is fair, and Francis is dark.

“ He drove out a devil, who was tormenting a Friar. The devil came out in a black cloud. The earth shook. A horrible stench filled the air, and the Friar died in bliss.

“ He touched the wounded side of a child. The wound was immediately healed ; and there grew over it, in memory of the Saint, a crimson rose.

“ A woman of Cortona was on the point of death from the pangs of child-birth. They placed on her belly the pack-saddle of an ass, which Francis had ridden : the pains disappeared and the woman was brought to bed with more happiness than when she had conceived ! . . .”

During the overwhelming heat of summer, when the sun lies in blinding sheets along the walls, and the silence of the sleeping town is only broken by the occasional cry of a cock drunk with the light, the sayings of the Master still crept in by the burning alley-ways ; and the report of the miracles that blossomed in his path refreshed the city as though its streets had suddenly

been filled with masses of flowers, all drenched with heavenly dew.

The autumn came and stored the earth with fruit ; and the grape-pickers, bending under their baskets, talked with the Saint, and the memory of him was as balm to their wearied limbs.

“ Let the winter come and we shall see him again ! . . . ”

Thus one thought lived in every mind, and from a distance Francis, without knowing it, accomplished the greatest miracle of all : the spirit of hatred disappeared : brought nearer by a common worship, men loved each other through him with loyal hearts : the peace of Christ lay over Umbria.

CHAPTER XI.

FAR from her companions, who, in the drooping twilight, wandered in groups under the olives and talked of the Master, their one and constant object of meditation, Simonetta had escaped to the oratory. Seated there in one of the stalls of the choir, she listened to the murmur of her thoughts.

Two years had passed since her entry into the Order. Had she found peace? She repeated to herself :

“ I am happy. I forget. . . .”

But in her inmost soul there remained that dark sense of pain which survives all deep sorrows. The monotony of her daily duties had benumbed her will : she had forced her mind to obey the movements of her body, and had destroyed in herself even the fanciful hope of change.

Seated there in the shadow of the choir, with her hands lying listless on her knees and her head bent, she seemed in a state of utter discouragement and despair, as when the will has lost all control over itself. Suddenly she trembled, and could not restrain a faint cry. Then she tried to smile, but well knowing that her soul had been laid bare in all its weakness and nakedness, she did not hide the tears that rose to her eyes.

It was Clara who had approached her.

“ Courage, little Sister ! ” she said in her soft, slow, precise voice.

Simonetta looked at her with mingled fear and adoration. The halo of sanctity, which had long crowned Francis, had already begun to shine round Clara of Assisi. A kind of inner flame seemed to light up that face, always so calm, with its

simple, straight features, clear-cut, like those of an ancient statue. In the dim light of the oratory her eyes seemed to shine more brightly, illumining as with a spiritual light the chapel all redolent of straw, of mouldy wood and beaten earth.

“ Courage ! ” she said again. “ The end of your conflicts is nigh. Soon you will taste the pure joy of those who are wedded to Christ, of those who have left all earthly pleasures on their earthly road to follow the Master and to share with him the treasures of Poverty. For love of us, to deliver us from the bonds which bind us to the prince of darkness, to reconcile us with His Father, He was born poor. He lived poor and died poor, amid measureless pangs, on the tree of the Cross. . . . Think of Poverty. The Master proclaimed its glory when he said : ‘ The birds of the air

have nests, and the young foxes have their holes, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' Recall those words in the hours of weakness, when the devil strives for your soul against the angels of the light. Think that the heavenly spouse is the most beautiful of the sons of men. Keep for him your troth. Tarry not along the road. Rest not your feet too long upon the earth. Let not the dust of the world tarnish your heart ! ”

Simonetta remained silent, but a look of confidence and peace showed itself on her face. Clara bent towards her and placed her hand tenderly on her shoulder.

“ After so long an absence,” she said, “ our father will soon return. Then you must be happy so that he may see your soul robed in its festal garments.”

With silent steps she left the oratory,

and with her going the shadows seemed colder and more dense, and the stale smell of the earth filled the darkness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE Master had come back. It was an autumn day, when the sun, in anger at his approaching death, seemed to bite with a cruel kiss the earth that he was leaving.

Sun-burnt and emaciated, his eyes stricken with a malady which compelled him to close them in the dazzling light, the Minstrel of God moved onwards with a glad smile. The peasants and the townsfolk pressed around him as he abandoned his hands to their kisses :

“ The Saint ! . . . The Saint ! . . . ”
they all exclaimed.

Little children slipped in between the legs of their elders to touch his garments with their hands, and then dashed off with roguish cries :

“I have touched him ! . . . I have touched him ! . . .”

Boys and girls preceded him, waving above their heads branches of olives. Weak old men, placed at the threshold of the doors, watched him eagerly and stretched towards him their trembling hands. Women, frenzied with mysticism and devotion, followed behind him, and at each moment threw themselves on the ground to kiss the earth where he had trod. The hum of a thousand questions, of vague answers, of vain but happy words, arose unceasingly from the crowd. Those who could not approach the Saint struggled at least to touch the garment or the cord of some Friar, whoever he might be ; for the sanctity of the Master was reflected over the whole Order. Thus, under the leafless trees all covered with dust, the billowy procession

gradually climbed the hill towards the little town, which lay in white terraces winding in and out upon the mountain side.

They reached the square, where San Rufino stood. The sun was streaming down on the pink stones of the Cathedral. The sky was of so deep a blue that the eye could not endure its glare, and from the depths of space could be heard descending on Assisi the cry of eagles that one could not see.

With a quick and active tread Francis passed up the steps of the sacred building. He then turned towards the people with uplifted hands ; and almost immediately the crowd that filled the square was silent. The mass of heads seemed to wave together, and here and there to bend with a tremor, like a shadow gliding over the surface of the corn-fields. On a sudden

they all knelt as one man. The Poverello was speaking. His voice was as the voice of a sunny day.

“ My brethren ! my brethren ! I find myself once more among you, and my heart is bursting with joy. Each of you loves me as your friend, and I in return love you one and all. But for the grace of Jesus I should die of happiness in your midst, and my soul would faint away in the effort to embrace all your souls.”

A shout interrupted him.

“ Saint ! . . . Saint ! . . . Saint ! . . . ”
He remained motionless, humbly proffering to God the incense of this earthly homage. Fresh cries arose from the people :

“ Francis ! Our child !

“ Saint, Saint !

“ O glorious Assisi !

“ Praise be to God !

- " O Poverello !
- " Saint of Jesus !
- " Miracles blossom from thy hands !
- " Divine Minstrel !
- " Master, bless us !
- " Saint ! Saint !
- " Ask God to pardon us !
- " Hear our prayers !
- " O Saint !
- " Call God among us !
- " Assisi ! Assisi thrice sanctified !
- " Francis !
- " Master !
- " O our brother !
- " O our love ! "

The voices rose and fell, and when the flood of sound seemed to weaken at one point, it rose again more loudly in another part of the crowd. To Francis it seemed as though he watched a tempest whose high

waves, as deeds of grace, fell at his feet on the pink steps of the Cathedral. Smiling at his dream, he prayed. Suddenly, among the mass of dark heads turned towards him, he recognised a face whose deep-cut lines of suffering and pride still seemed to quiver with a gleam of hope. He felt a quick thrill of triumph, and thanked God that He had brought Orlando Starella to his feet.

When the noise had ceased, he spoke again. He knew well the simple words that this people of children could understand. He did not preach. In the clear sweetness of the words he used he made them all partakers of his love.

“I am nothing, nothing, nothing,” he said, “the humblest among you is a great lord compared to me, for I am viler than the earth which we tread under foot. Still,

you come to me as though I were worthy. You warm me with your welcome as the sun warms me with his light. Why? why? Masseo, my kind companion, said the same thing to me yesterday: 'It is always you! Always you! All run to touch your robe! All wish to hear your voice and to see you! Why?' Ah, how I love him that he should have spoken thus to me! For I could answer him, 'Masseo, I am the poorest and most miserable of all earthly creatures: a blade of grass is a thousand times more noble and more beautiful than I; but for this very reason God has chosen me to show to men what He can do with the meanest thing, when His hand has touched it.' I go, brethren, I go whither God sends me. It is not I whom you greet, for I do not merit it. It is not my voice that you

hearken to, for it is unworthy. You greet the presence of God, you listen to His voice ! . . . Others have asked me : ‘ Why are you always so gay, always so gay ? You lie on the bare ground, you eat nothing but bread, you drink only water : your body is broken with a thousand ills ; the devils come and tempt you at night. Still, you laugh and sing ! Why ? ’ I will tell you why. It is because I am fighting for the most beautiful Lady to be found under the brightness of the stars. A good knight cannot be sad, for he consecrates every moment of his life to her who has won his heart. In the worst tribulations he sees before him the image of his betrothed. If sometimes he does not see her, he is not sad, he does not think himself abandoned, he does not lose hope. He only says to himself, ‘ For a moment my Lady follows,

instead of going before me ! ' When he fights for her she will re-appear. Thus do the paladins for the ladies of high degree, whose colours they wear. And I, I love a princess many times more beautiful, who grows not old, and whose fidelity remains unstained. That is why I am more joyous than the companions of King Arthur. You know her well, my betrothed, since I have sung her glory : she is my Lady Poverty, the sister of the angels. Mark well the happiness she wins for those who reject all earthly wealth, to possess only the unique treasure of her love ! Look well and see it in my joy, O my brethren of Assisi, my brethren of Umbria, and all of you, my brethren in God, who dwell in the wide world ! . . . "

When he had finished speaking, enthusiastic shouts arose from the square.

The townsmen scattered their clothing and their money about them, crying :

“ We will follow thee ! . . . We will follow thee ! ”

Women, with eager eyes and outstretched arms, seemed ready to throw themselves before him. An old archer of La Rocca, who was somewhat deaf, heard the tumult that was going on around him, and cried aloud :

“ A miracle ! a miracle ! I have recovered my hearing ! A miracle ! ”

In an instant the news spread across the square and down the steep narrow streets, which were crowded with late comers. The words of the Saint had accomplished a new miracle ! Raised upon the shoulders of his neighbours, the old soldier, powerless to make himself heard, gesticulated, pointing to his ears, and laughed and wept. They carried him off

in triumph. The crowd followed, crushing each other against the walls. The children shouted themselves hoarse :

“ A miracle ! . . . The deaf man of La Rocca hears ! . . . A miracle . . . a miracle ! ”

Only Orlando Starella remained facing Francis. He gazed at him, and was dimly conscious of a wish to go to him, and yet a timorous awe held him back. The Master also looked at him ; until Orlando, unable any longer to bear the superhuman intensity of that look, so full of love, of pity, and of pardon, abruptly turned away and fled, lest he should throw himself at the Poverello's feet. He was soon lost in the crowd, and Francis entered the Church, while outside in Assisi the roar of the people's voices could still be heard proclaiming the miracle.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER the enthusiasm of the first days, came many a pang to assail the heart of the Poverello. A father, standing on the top of a slippery incline above a boundless river, who saw his child slip from his hands and sink slowly, yet inevitably, towards the gulf, would suffer agony, the intensity of which no words can describe. The Man of Assisi saw his Order, directed by Friars who were unfaithful to his dreams, sliding only too surely down the slope that was leading it to death. To death? no, not to sheer annihilation, but to a destruction that perhaps was even worse, the destruction of an ideal. The Friars were becoming monks. The Minstrels of God were beginning to forget the charm of the

dusty roads where the sunshine fills men with song, the mossy stones around the springs, the log-huts, and Poverty.

Despite his faith and his resolve to smile even through his tears, the Poverello would now and then succumb to momentary fits of weakness. His discouragement sometimes was so profound that he thought of leaving his brethren and taking refuge on some peak of the Apennines, there to pass the remainder of his life in the depths of the forests which he would people with his prayers.

It was Clara who gave him strength again.

“My father!” she said, “my companions and I have made inquiry of God, and He has told us that you should continue to preach the Gospel.”

After many struggles Francis followed

the counsel of his friend, and began again to propagate around him the Word of God. During all that autumn, now drawing to its close, the little villages of Umbria received his visits. He was weak and easily fatigued ; and his eyes caused him great pain. But, dusty yet divine, he would go and sit before the moss-clad doors ; and the welcome of the peasants made him glad.

Sometimes he would go and preach at Assisi, at Rieti, at Perugia, at Foligno. Those were festal days for the craggy cities, when the Poor Man of the Lord came to call them to the way of the Gospel. Almost always, among the thronged ranks of those who listened to him, he saw Orlando Starella. Then his heart would be filled with joy. His voice would become more eloquent ; when speaking, he would

bend forward to his hearers with outstretched hands, as though to reap in and gather up their souls. It was the first time that he tried to make a conquest. Aforetime, those predestined for the new life had come spontaneously to him, because his words expressed the ideal that dimly dwelt within their souls. But here Francis wished to conquer. In the struggle he found again the joyous tones and accents of his youth. And so he would repeat in ecstasy :

“ You are not happy, my brethren, you are not happy ! How can you be ? The cares of the world fill your hearts, and the cares of the world are sad, and mean, and dark. You who are rich are not happy because you think how best to keep and to increase your riches. You who are poor are not happy because you think

to become rich. Yet how will riches profit you, if you live according to Christ? He has given you the whole creation for a palace. He sings to you, in the murmur of the trees, in the noise of the waters, in the tremor of the breeze at spring-time, every song you can imagine. He smiles to you in the grace of the flowers, and the sun is the image of his beauty. Go out into the forests and the fields! Forget your wars, your ambitions, your counting-houses where you sell your goods: forget everything that fills your soul with darkness, and think only of giving thanks to God. Do you not believe that the whiteness of a lily is a miracle? It is a miracle! And, if you look at the world with the eyes of a little child, you will recognise that you are living in the midst of a wonder eternally renewed. Then all your griefs and all

your ambitions will make you smile with pity at yourselves, and you will regret the time that you have not consecrated to sing, ‘Glory to thee, O Lord! . . .’ Your soul will be enraptured with love. Those who suffer will no longer feel their sufferings. They will be like the sick man, who renews his life with the birth of spring, and who, forgetful of past ills, thanks God for having made him suffer, and thus procured him a joy quite new, a joy sweet even unto tears! . . .”

Each time, when the Man of Assisi had finished speaking, Orlando felt drawn towards him by the force of the sweetness and the charm that emanated from the person of the Saint. Pride alone held him back. Since Simonetta had been torn from him, he had been tossed about in a storm of doubt and folly such as only a violent

passion that has gone astray can provoke in an ardent mind. Full of impetuous pride, accustomed to realise all his desires, even by violence if need be, he had at first welcomed the maddest projects : to assassinate Francis, to burn Portiuncula, to carry off Simonetta. But he found himself confronted with obstacles against which force does not prevail : weakness, innocence, holiness. He had suffered his first defeat that evening when the Master had offered his breast to the blow, and the dagger had fallen from his hand. On each occasion, later, when he had formed some wild project of rapine or murder, he had felt the same misgivings arise within him, until it seemed to him sometimes that his movements were controlled by a supernatural hand.

He had tried to forget Simonetta. He

had travelled, he had fought. But never had he ceased to see the serious, child-like face, whose great dark eyes regarded him so sadly. He had sought distraction in other loves. Every town in Umbria had seen him pass along their streets, mounted on a fiery black horse, while at his side, on a pure white mule, rode a French courtesan with her red hair and dazzling smile. He had sent her away after a few months, and the Archbishop of Perugia had made her his mistress.

Then he had tried solitude. He had asked himself by what mystery the Friars lived in happiness when deprived of every thing that makes glad the world, and full of love when far from all that awakens love in men. Then by degrees his memory of Simonetta softened. He loved her as deeply as ever, but less violently. Some-

times he thought that if he could join the Order, he would find in that brotherhood a quiet and sufficing happiness. The forest surrounding Portiuncula, the huts under the trees, the ripple of the running waters in the warm sunshine which here and there shed its golden flowers upon the moss, often seemed to him to form an asylum where sorrow could not penetrate.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOME months passed. The Poverello felt himself more and more a stranger to the work that he had founded. Idleness, ambition, vain learning, were creeping into the Order. The Friars were becoming the confidants of prelates and their men of business. The Man of Assisi was torn with grief. He whose soul was wont to melt in love sometimes felt a sudden wish to curse. Among the astonished faithful his voice echoed in the severe tones of a judge.

“ May they be cursed who betray their spouse, Poverty ! May they be cursed who give themselves over to the works of darkness ! They desire learning, wealth and office. But the devil alone can give

them these. That which the devil can never give is the love of Christ. May they be cursed who have forgotten this love ! ”

Under the December sky, in the midst of the leafless trees, over that rough, afflicted land which seemed so wild when it had put off its festal garments, his angry voice trembled in the winter wind, and the Friars, drawing their coarse woollen cloaks more tightly over their shoulders and shivering with cold, terror, and despair, bowed themselves in silence.

The Master could find joy no longer except with the companions of his youth, Angelo, Rufino, Juniper, and Léon, whom he called the little lamb of God. But above all the influence of Clara soothed him. Erect, calm, and pale as ivory, she would fix on the Poverello the gaze

of her great eyes, so soft yet full of flame ; and under their caress he would gradually feel his soul assuaged.

He confided to her his dearest secrets and even the thoughts at which he blushed. Before her he was no longer the leader of men whose deeds had drawn, throughout the world, that throng of the Minstrels of God. In the oratory of St. Damian, under the grey stone vault, between the benches of oak, he was only a weak man fainting under his affliction.

“ Clara ! ” he said, “ Clara ! . . . the devils came to torment me this night. They have put in my heart thoughts which will cause me to be damned. . . . I have regretted the use to which I have put my life. . . . Now, I am ashamed . . . I said to myself : ‘ Look at the peasants. They marry. They have children, who, on their

return at evening, throw their arms around their necks. They have a wife who smiles to them, a little house between the trees, a fire upon the hearth. They are happy. . . And thou, what art thou? An orphan! . . . Thou hast neither child, nor hearth, nor wife. Thou roamest over the earth awaiting thine end upon it. Thou art so poor, so mean, so vile that the beasts of the woods are happier than thou! 'Such are the thoughts with which the devil tempted me. In vain I tore my loins with cords, those hell-sent visions would not leave me. . . . Still, God helped me! . . . I seized handfuls of snow and made with it figures of women, of children, of servants, and I said to the devil: 'These are the tyrants whose absence you would make me regret. . . . Let the sun dissolve them! Let them disappear in the light, even as

all earthly passions have disappeared in the single love I bear for Poverty ! ' . . . When morning broke, those snowy images vanished in the rays of the rising sun, and the devils fled away. But perhaps to-morrow they will return."

Clara placed her hand softly on the Poverello's brow.

" My brother, calm yourself. The devils have no power against your sanctity. You are no orphan, but the cherished son of God, Who performs His miracles by your hands. Spread over the wide world, you have thousands of children who love you and whose hearts beat only for you. . . . Calm yourself, Master, your ideal will not be betrayed. If there be profaners who would touch the Order, we shall know how to uphold before them the pure lily of your dream. Be happy, be gay, my brother.

Winter with the dark burden of its mists weighs on us, but when the spring-time returns, you will be able to sing again along the roads the praise of God. . . . Think, Master, Christmas is drawing nigh. Would you that we should celebrate together the night of the nativity? . . . We will show Jesus in His glory; we will light the pathways of the forest; the people will come, as the Magi came of old. The Virgin's smile will replace for us the absent sun."

Francis stood erect, his eyes burning with sudden joy. Always in that ailing body the emotions followed one another thus, diverse and violent. He took Clara's hands and pressed them in his own.

"Blessed be thou who art so well named, who makest the light to shine in the darkness, thrice holy, sister of the angels!"

CHAPTER XV.

NOEL !

Umbria was glad above measure, when it knew that the Saint would celebrate the birth of Christ and revive the night of Bethlehem. It was the village of Greccio in the valley of Rieti that received the pilgrims. During the preceding twenty-four hours they had come, country-folk, people of the towns, and Friars from all parts of the province. In long processions they had travelled by night. The snow covered the earth. From the heights of the mountains the wind beat down upon the valley in icy gusts, beneath which the black trees moaned.

They slipped as they walked along the paths. The moon shone over the snow,

tinting it with blue and gold. The pale stars quivered in the fleecy sky, and the shadow of the ravines seemed infinite. But from all sides arose the chants of men. They had come from Perugia, from Assisi, from Bettona, from every village of the province, from every hermitage of the mountains. Some had walked for two days, indifferent to suffering, leaning on their long staves, their eyes dazzled in advance by the spectacle which was to thrill them. The women were not less brave, and the astonished children did not dare to cry. That they might not miss their way and to put the wolves to flight the stronger men carried great flaming brands.

Thus from all parts of Umbria processions wound along the tortuous roads, and the burning of resin glowed red upon the

snow. The Poor Men were the most joyful, singing as they walked. They were glorifying Christ. As they approached Greccio, they could distinguish in the distance voices which seemed to answer to their own : still they marched on, and from every side the chants burst forth. All this sonorous gaiety was converging towards the chapel ; to Francis, lost in ecstasy, it seemed as though the voice of a whole world was rising up to heaven.

The church, plain as the very stable where the Christ was born, was brilliant with light. This was its only beauty. At the side of the choir the Poverello had prepared the manger. An ox and an ass, lent by the peasants, gazed with their dull soft eyes upon a big chubby-faced baby who lay stretched on his back quite naked, and smiled as he sucked his thumb. A sound

of joy throbbed through the nave. The people crushed forward against each other. All wished to see the baby who represented Jesus, all wished to see the Poverello.

A damp warmth filled the church. The water trickled down the walls. The smell of sweat, of wet clothes, and of rotten straw mingled with that of the incense. In every face there shone the same look of adoration. The souls of all those human beings beat in unison.

When the mass began there was a sudden silence. One could only hear the sound of the deep breathing of the crowd, and, sometimes, the cry of a child. When Francis read the Gospel, the silence seemed still more profound. A supernatural grace was upon the people. All thought themselves at Bethlehem; they had come, following the Magi and the shepherds, guided by the

light of the Star: they had come to the stable where rested the Son of Man.

They listened, all restrained in awe. Some women wept, their arms stretched lovingly towards the manger where the infant now slumbered. Each man felt the throb of his heart as it beat heavily against his overburdened breast.

At last the Man of Assisi began to preach.

When he appeared above the crowd, pale and worn, but his eyes aflame with passion, all knelt. They bent before him, trembling, as though they had seen their God.

He spoke, rapt in holy ecstasy. To draw men to love, he recounted to them the life of Christ:

“He was a happy child. He could have tasted all the joys that delight the children of men, yet he preferred humiliation,

treachery, suffering. He has saved you, my brethren! . . . He passed through the valleys full of sunshine, of fruits, of scents, and he sang of love. The lilies flowered under his feet. Miracles poured unceasingly from his hands. He comforted the poor, he raised the afflicted, and struck pride and violence with consternation. All the sins of men, of times past and of the times to come, our depravity, our lies, our adulteries—he has reaped and garnered them all even as a harvest of poisonous roses. He was burdened with the weight of our sins, and he said to his Father: ‘Here am I, Lord. I am the messenger of the earth. They have charged me with all their crimes. Grant that in me alone Thy creatures may be chastised and saved!’ God heard the prayer of His Son! . . . Oh! are not your hearts torn? It was to snatch you from

eternal night that he died on the Cross. He gave you all: His tears, His blood, His life, His mother's sobs. He has bought you. He has saved you! . . . Will you always forget him? What does he ask of you? To love him! Do you love him? . . . Oh, if you loved Him, you would have pity on the poor, for He was the poorest of all living men! You would be charitable to those who suffer, for He comforted them! You would not make war against each other for He has said: 'Thou shalt not kill! . . .' You would direct all your thoughts towards Him, Whose smile still shines upon the earth! You would devote every instant of your life to His love, and lose yourselves therein! And you would seek death with arms outstretched towards Him in a kiss of love! . . ."

A sound of wailing arose from the prostrate crowd. Men whose sins oppressed them sobbed and beat their breasts with violence. At times a woman's voice was heard :

“ Jesus ! . . . Jesus ! . . Pardon ! . . . ”

And when at length, broken with fatigue, the Man of Assisi raised his hands to bless, a profound silence fell upon the people, and they remained humbled, awestruck, beneath the gesture of those two pallid hands which poured out pity upon them.

* * * *

The church was empty. Outside the joyous chants burst forth anew, and the night was bright with fires.

Francis had remained alone in the choir. Prostrate before the altar he was praying as the candles died out one by one.

“ Am I still Thy child, O God ? Hast

Thou forgiven me those dark hours when I succumbed to the attack of the Evil One? If I have belied Thy hopes, forgive me, for Thy mercy is greater than my sins. Show me, by some sign of Thy sovereign will, that Thou dost permit me to fare once more along the roads of the world, without a lute and without a sword, but with my voice alone, transfigured by the chanting of Thy glory, O Lord! . . .”

The last candle had died away, and darkness filled the nave. The Man of Assisi raised himself, and with uncertain steps crossed the church. Suddenly, from the shadow of a pillar, a man stepped out and threw himself at his feet, his arms outstretched, murmuring the while with a trembling voice :

“ Master! . . . My father! . . . It is I! . . .”

With a glad cry Francis raised him.

“Orlando ! . . . It is I that should kneel to you. It is for me to kiss your feet. You are the messenger of God, my brother, the bringer of good tidings.”

“I am no more he whom you knew, Master. . . . I will try to be humble and good. I will love Poverty with a single love. Will you have me as a brother ? ”

“I expected you,” said the Poverello.

They went out of the dark church together. Far away to the horizon stretched the snow, and over it the rising sun was streaming in broad rays of red and violet light. The heaven was full of the brightness of the dawn : and they both stopped, dazzled by the glory of creation.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW brother was numbered in the Order. Like all those whom an absolute conversion had torn from the luxury and dissipation of a worldly life, Orlando at first buried himself in solitude and silence. The peasant folk who might decide to follow the new life, brought to the hermitages their guileless souls and their simple love of God ; and straightway they tasted the joys of a liberty such as they had never known, and showed forth that hearty gaiety which Francis had made a virtue. But those who had suffered, loved or lived, and whom the longing for oblivion, or the need of expiation had thrown into the arms of Poverty, could only win laboriously, within themselves, peace and tranquility.

Remorse and shame, disgust and regret for lost pleasures, would pass in succession through their minds. From the beginning the soul of Orlando was as a field laid waste by battle, and he well might ask himself if, in the resolution he had taken, he would find the peace he sought.

The brethren were filled with gladness when he came to set down, at the threshold of the huts, the pride of the past. From St. Mary of the Angels to St. Damian the news hastened through the snow-clad forest: the men of the dark-brown clothing, stamping through the mud, their feet red with cold, carried it with rapture and warmed themselves in the very joy of it.

Of all the Sisters, Clara was informed the first. Softly she answered the messenger:

“He is of those for whom the Divine Love cannot take the place of other love.”

The Friar who had spoken to her was of humble birth. Although he revered Clara as a Saint, her words seemed sinful to him. He withdrew, beating his breast vigorously, and, even as he splashed his way through the melting snow, he prayed for his sister, whom the devil had led astray.

Clara, left alone under the vault of her Chapel with the odour of the incense and the damp earth, thought for a moment. Then she sought out Simonetta.

Standing in a ray of sunshine on the narrow terrace, whence one's eyes could roam over a whole world, she was watching the hills white with snow, as they sank towards the horizon and disappeared in the mist. The forests seemed as a brown net-work stretched over the earth, and between them the Tescio rolled her steel-grey flood.

“Simonetta!” said the Abbess.

The young girl quickly turned, and blushed like a child who has been found at fault.

“My sister! . . .” she murmured, joining her hands.

Clara regarded her tenderly. Such trusting love shone from her eyes, that Simonetta felt less lonely, and understood, even as it vanished, the depth of her despair.

“Be brave,” said Clara at length, “I ought to think that you will now be happy. Still. . . .”

She stopped awhile. Then, holding with her gaze the great timid eyes that watched her, she continued:

“He has joined the Order. For the future he will be your brother, Simonetta.”

For a moment, like a lightning flash, the novice was torn from the world: sur-

rounding objects raced in eddies about her, and a heavy darkness obscured for her the light of day ; she felt that she was fainting. But it was only for a moment. When she recovered herself she was still on the terrace, and Clara, holding her in her arms, was watching her lovingly. Then she had the strength to smile, and to murmur :

“ Thank you ! . . . ”

Clara went away. The novice lowered her veil over her eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT length the rigour of the winter became milder. The torrents, full to the brim, rushed along with their jerky mocking refrain : trees, which only yesterday had seemed for ever withered, were now swelling with renewed life. On the hill sides large purple-black patches appeared amidst the vanquished snow. In the depths of the sky the mists were torn asunder, and blue islets showed themselves in the ocean of the clouds. The birds soared high in the air, and unseen music spread over the earth.

It was spring once more.

At the first twitter of the larks between the furrows, the Minstrels of God left their huts. They wandered in the forest of St. Mary of the Angels, among the bare trees

where the buds were burgeoning ; and as they met along the paths, they exchanged glad, joyous words. From St. Mary to Rivo Torto, from Rivo Torto to St. Damian, from St. Damian to the Carceri they went, full of the joy of life and revelling in the spring sunshine. The light enchanted their eyes. They cared not that, in the ditches, the snow had not yet passed away, or that in the deep ruts it froze their naked feet. Francis himself felt a return of youth, and was less sad. During the gloomy winter he would sometimes weep over his work, which seemed tottering to its fall. His companions could hear him groan as he prayed with a loud voice :

“ My God ! my God ! I have followed the road which Thy hand pointed out to me. I have taught men to love Thee. In poverty I asked them to follow Thee, Who

Thyself wast poor among us. But as Thou knowest, O my God, my voice is no longer heard. Those who should live under the open sky, with bread hardly earned, shut themselves up in monasteries and their hands disdain to work any longer. They prefer learning to Thy Word, and earthly riches to Holy Poverty. . . . What can I do amongst them, O my Lord? I am weak, and feeble, and almost blind. Why wilt Thou not call me to Thee, O Jesus? Suffer me at least to withdraw myself from men! Let me bury myself in solitude, and there, with Thy Crucifix to place upon my lips, may I die quickly, alone like an animal, face to face with Thee, naked upon the naked earth, O Lord! . . ."

Thus the Minstrel, who on the highways of all the world had glorified his mystic love, would feel his voice was breaking;

and each year the sadness of winter oppressed his soul. But that Christmas-tide at Greccio had restored him. The first days of returning brightness were for him as the smile of spring-time that covered the face of the earth. Hope was born anew within him, and he wished to take the road again.

“Wait until the sun is a little higher!” said Léon to him. “Do not set out yet! I tremble for you.”

But he answered:

“What matters warmth if there be brightness? Will you not follow me?”

“I will follow you everywhere.”

They went to St. Damian, to Rivo Torto, or they climbed up to Assisi. Sometimes the north wind was their escort: it whistled down the sloping streets that run in steps upon the mountain side; it whirled in

eddies with a bitter keenness in front of the Cathedral and the colonnade of Minerva. But the coldest north wind, when it blows at spring-time, is more welcome than the warmest winds of winter. Francis blessed his little sister, the cold spring, pledge of radiant summer. He was seized with a wish to see again all those oases of sanctity which the Friars had formed in their hermitages of the Apennines. Always followed by Léon, he went from Spello to Gubbio, from Gubbio to Montefalco, from Montefalco to Bettona. He returned with the light of joy in his eyes, which, sometimes indeed, could see the world no more ; and he strove to communicate to all the sweetness of that returning dawn.

One day, when he was coming back from Perugia to St. Mary of the Angels by one of those blocked-in tracks which the sun

never warms, and which was still covered with frozen mud, he wished to pour into the soul of Léon some little of the charming gaiety that was overflowing from his own.

“ My brother ! ” he said, “ Oh brother mine ! Do you know what is perfect happiness ? ”

“ Teach it to me, my Master,” replied his companion humbly.

“ Imagine,” continued Francis, “ imagine that, by the Grace of God, our Friars cover the whole world, and that everywhere they are an example of holiness : that would not be for me true happiness.

Léon looked confidently at his leader and did not answer.

They continued walking. A streamlet rippled merrily beside the path : here and there one could see the pale buds on the briars.

Francis went on :

“ Listen, dear lamb of God, if I could give light to the blind, if I could drive out devils, could restore their hearing to the deaf, and their speech to the dumb, if even I could raise the dead after four days, that would not be for me true happiness.”

They made a few steps in silence. Through a sudden opening of the path, they could see, about a thousand yards away, St. Mary of the Angels all squat among the gaunt trees, like a wood-cutter's hovel.

“ And when all they who dwell there,” continued Francis, “ when all of them shall speak the language of the seraphims, shall know the course of the stars, shall understand the virtue of the plants, and the secrets of creation, when their mere speech shall suffice to convert the heathen, happiness will not be there ! ”

The Poverello stopped. He beamed with enthusiasm, his eyes illumined by a poet's fire. Léon contemplated with awe that pale, thin face which resembled Him Who was crucified, and which at that moment was radiant with youth and love.

“Where is happiness, O Master?” asked the humble follower. Where is happiness? . . .”

Softly Francis put his hand upon his shoulder. Pointing in the distance to the earthen shelter that was the palace of their faith, in a low voice, as though confiding a secret, he said :

“When we shall reach St. Mary of the Angels, all shivering with cold, all covered with mud, perhaps the porter will not recognise us.”

“Why?” asked the astonished Léon.
“He will surely recognise us!”

“ But suppose he does not recognise us ! Let me hope that he will not, my brother. . . He must not recognise us. He must come out angrily and ask us : ‘ Who are you ? ’ ‘ We are two of your brethren.’ Then he will cry out, ‘ You lie. You are two rascals who deceive charitable souls and steal the gifts of the poor. Begone ! . . .’ And he will refuse to open to us. And we shall have then to wait at the door in our wet clothes, with our feet in the mud and hunger in our bodies. We shall remain there until even, without complaining, without losing patience, but blessing the porter, who knows our inmost souls, and by whose voice God Himself has spoken against us. There, my brother, will be the beginning of happiness. And when evening has come, we will knock again. Then the good porter will come out once

more and will drive us away, crying at the top of his voice, ' Begone ! Be off with you, you rogues ! you robbers ! ' Then he will shut the door, and we shall remain outside. We shall bless him and there will be the beginning of happiness ! . . . When full night has come, we shall be worn out with cold and hunger and darkness. Then we shall knock again and beg to be allowed to enter. But by that time the porter will have lost all patience : ' Stupid fools ! ' he will say, ' I will pay you according to your deserts,' and he will rush out, armed with a knotted cudgel, and seize us by our hoods and throw us in the mud and the stones, and with kicks and blows make our bones resound against the earth. We shall not complain. We shall bear with joy everything that he may please to make us suffer. We shall think that it is Christ

who punishes us by the hands of this man ; and that our sufferings are blessings sent by Him who died for us. . . . Then only, my brother, shall we know perfect happiness ! . . .”

Léon smiled without saying anything. For some time they walked on in silence.

“ I hope, however, the porter will recognise us ! ” said the good Friar at length.

Francis looked at him gaily.

“ You have not been beaten, Master,” continued his companion. “ You have not suffered cold and hunger in the frozen mud. The porter has not yet dragged you face downwards over the stones. Still you seem happy ! ”

“ I am, I am henceforth ! ” cried Francis. “ I thought I was dying and I saw my brethren dropping away from me, as the leaves fall from a withered branch. But

the spring has given me hope again. We will go as we were wont to do, my brother, like knight-errants, under our stout cuirasses of brown cloth. To those who ask, as formerly they asked: 'Why do you seem so gay?' we will reply as of old, 'Because our hearts are full of love! We have left our mountains to magnify the kingdom of our Lady, our voice is strong to sing her beauty. Joyous voices and loving hearts—we do not wish for other arms, for we are the Minstrels of God!'"

Léon clasped his hands with enthusiasm. He felt his heart bound within him, even as the young goat that escapes to the slopes all bathed in sunshine, whence one can feel spring's indefinable charm.

"I will accompany you, my Master. Oh! with what joy I shall attend you! We will take all those who wish to come

with us, all those who do not know the joys of pilgrimage. We will drag Elias from his books, Rufino from his solitude, Orlando from his grief."

Francis was silent for a moment. Then, almost in a whisper, he repeated in echo :

" Yes, Orlando from his grief ! "

CHAPTER XVIII.

NATURE was adorning herself for the glories of June. Everywhere there appeared an over-abundance of life, in the trees weighed down by their mass of foliage, in the meadows dazzling with flowers, and in the peaceful, plenteous waters of the springs.

But the joy of life did not reach the hearts of Orlando or Simonetta. He in his chamber at St. Mary of the Angels, she in the little cloister of St. Damian, each of them watching the clump of trees that sheltered all their love—they lived in an interchange of thought, even while they reproached themselves for its poisoned sweetness.

Sometimes Simonetta tried to persuade

herself that she was happy, and that her prayers were heard. From her little flower-clad terrace, her gaze fixed upon the undulating expanse before her, she contemplated the plain where Orlando was living and thought of him.

“Like me, he has come to seek forgetfulness and release. I ought to hate him as an enemy of my people, but God has allowed him to expiate his fault, and has received him among His children. He has become my brother, poor and friendless, as I am henceforward. With equal steps we move, each one of us, towards pardon, he for his crimes, I for my love. . . .”

Even while she tried to confuse him thus in the crowd of the Friars, the true image of Orlando sometimes stood out clearly before her. She remembered that she had

loved him in another way, and more than one can love in God. Suddenly she would see him, pale and resolute, his hair dishevelled, his red sword in his hand, prepared to slay, and yet repeating :

“ I love you ! . . . You shall be my wife, for I love you ! and you love me, Simonetta, despite the past.”

Then she would be torn with remorse and shame and disgust of herself. She would shut her eyes desperately so as not to see the Tescio shining among the flowers on its banks, or the pathways down which her reverie coursed. But she could not blind her memory, and she would take refuge in the Chapel to pray there with a terror-stricken fervour.

“ My God ! my God ! . . . Tear out these thoughts from my heart ! Make me pure again like the child I once was !

Grant me forgetfulness! Grant that I may earn pardon! . . .”

Her remorse and her terror found vent in these stormy lamentations. But always within her, in a region of her being where her will held no sway, the image of Orlando remained unshaken, like the statue of a saint in a crypt.

Often indeed Clara surprised her kneeling on the floor of the Chapel. Knowing the power of silence, she did not speak, but would sit beside her and take her in her arms, and bathe in the light of her eyes the pale face that rested on her shoulder. A smile dwelt ever on her lips and gave them an expression of sorrow brightened by hope. Her eyes dispensed a restful calm. They asked no questions, discerning without effort all the suffering under which a soul might struggle.

Simonetta would abandon herself to the sweetness of that silent pity, which expected nothing from human admonition, but everything from the flight of time and the goodness of God.

In the hermitage of St. Mary of the Angels Orlando Starella suffered the same torments.

He had given himself to God with the same violence that had marked all his passions. The novelty of discomfort had at first distracted his grief. But habit intervened, and the exercises of piety no longer sufficed to fill the void of time. Inapt at lying to himself, he recognised in despair that the Franciscan ideal did not content his heart, and he grieved for the life he had lost.

Why had he knocked at the door of the Order? To find there peace and consola-

tion? To forget there a love that was impossible? He had believed it in good faith. But had he really recognised the secret motives of his act? Gradually he was forced to put the question to himself. Had he not renounced the world simply to be nearer her whom he loved? Simonetta was lost to him for ever, unless he could clothe in religious sympathy the love that she put away from her with horror. He had believed himself to be sincere and perhaps had deceived himself. But henceforth he trembled to feel that he was sacrilegious, a hypocrite to his vows, his soul filled with thoughts that God could not drive away, his eyes filled with the single image that his dreams erected on every altar, even while there wandered over his lips the prayers that did not touch his heart.

Always gloomy and silent, he avoided the society of the Friars. Juniper, the simplest of them, watched him with timid astonishment.

“ You are not gay ! ” he said one day. “ Perhaps you are possessed by a devil. Such a thing happened once to a novice. But Francis put his hand upon his head and said to the devil : ‘ By the most Holy Obedience, I adjure you to come out instantly, oh stinking beast ! . . . ’ When he had repeated this order three times, the devil bounded out of the mouth of the novice with a terrible noise, and with such commotion everywhere that the trees were split, and the boulders burst asunder. From that day the novice was happy. . . . You should ask Francis to cure you. He will drive out the devil which undoubtedly is within you.”

Orlando smiled sadly. Certainly there was a devil within him, but no one could drive it away, since he himself loved his suffering and found a sensual pleasure in his pain. Sometimes, however, he was troubled with a feeling of disgust. He did not wish to deceive the Poverello. He thought of how he could make a confession, of the possibility of going away. But this fugitive wish only brought his weakness into greater relief. He felt in truth that he had not the courage to leave the Order, so long as Simonetta remained in it. Then he confessed to himself that he had made his vows to Poverty only for love of a woman; he despised himself for his cowardice, yet all the while he cherished in his inmost soul a vague hope for the future.

Thus they both lived in their hermitages, he at St. Mary of the Angels, she at St.

Damian. Months passed without their seeing each other. Without news of their relations or of the friends of other days, they were isolated among the Poor Men and their Sisters, in the rustling solitude of the great oaks.

The people of Assisi had forgotten that brief love adventure. The merchants waiting for their clients at their doorways, in the cool shadow of the narrow, stony streets, no longer talked of Orlando and Simonetta. Still, in their loneliness, the two children suffered all the old sufferings of humanity. Their hearts were divided betwixt love and God. They could not trace on their mud cells the old device of the anchorites: *O beata solitudo ! O sola beatitudo ! . . .* for with each of them there lived a persistent memory, the companion of their every hour.

Full of weakness and despair, they asked God to grant them forgetfulness and the grace never to see each other again. But in the murmuring forests where they wandered in their trouble, they trembled with a mortal joy at the thought that perhaps one day they would meet each other there.

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE morning before day-break Orlando left the dark forest with its all-pervading odour of damp earth. A heavy dew lay on the grass. The huts of the Friars, under the holm-oaks, seemed like large deserted ant-hills. The silence was absolute, broken only from time to time by the awkward flutter of an awakened bird, whose wings, heavy with the dew, could hardly support his flight.

Orlando followed one of the pathways leading to Rivo Torto and Subasio. By the time he came out of the wood, a pale light had appeared on the horizon. He could distinguish the clump of trees surrounding St. Damian and his heart shrunk within him.

She is sleeping, perhaps, like a child, like innocence itself. Her cheek rests upon her hand and she scarcely breathes. . . .

Oh! to be able to watch over that sleep! To stand motionless beside her, to have nothing else to live for but to watch her, to envelop her with so much love that at last she would awake and smile. Then she would stretch out her arms and place her head upon his breast, and holding him clasped to her would go to sleep again, calm as a new-born child whose mother watches over its repose. And he would bend over her. Slowly, without waking her, his lips would lightly touch her clear brow. . . . Accursed dreams! . . . Oh! that at least one might enjoy that gloomy peace of mind where thought is dead! . . .

Thus he went on, sometimes losing

himself, while the stones rolled under his heedless feet. At last he reached the slopes of Subasio. The pathway to Gabbiano rose steeply before him. Orlando had to slacken his speed and his heart was assuaged.

On his right the precipice became more abrupt at every step. Some trees hid it from him, but above their bushy tops he could see the plain in the distance. Faint rosy gleams began to flit across the milky whiteness of the dawn. The ridges of the hills gleamed bright above the darkness of their slopes. They seemed like shining shafts of light, breaking through a bed of shadow and stretching far away to the horizon where shimmered a wavering line of gold. On his left the mountain rose steeply at his very side. Gaunt fig-trees, olives, oaks, and chestnuts overhung the

path. Above the Carceri he crossed a torrent. The water coming down from the heights rushed foaming over the red pebbles and the sand, and then, in long, almost perpendicular falls, rolled down abruptly into the plain. At last the day appeared in all its glory. In and out among the hills wound the network of vines and stunted elms. The olive gardens spread like a sheet of silver over the land.

Orlando walked on more peacefully. The freshness of the morning had brought with it a feeling of resignation—that sense of prostration which follows an access of despair, that absence of suffering which is nought else but the physical impossibility to suffer any more. On his left he passed the Benedictine Monastery, standing in the midst of the well-cultivated fields with which the industry of the monks had

covered the mountain side. A cock crowed. The pulley of a well creaked in the courtyard of the hermitage. Then, quick and light, a little bell began to ring impetuously. It was the familiar sound that called the hermits to the labours of another day. It seemed to Orlando that here at least these people must be happy, and that the cares of humanity could not climb so far above the world.

The pathway entered a forest of rhododendrons. As far as one could see, the stunted bushes, brilliant with rosy stars, lay in dense clusters along the slope of the mountain. The Franciscan passed through them, stopped at each step by roots jutting from the ground and untrimmed branches that barred his road. Before him, on a rocky spur, rose the castle of Sasso Rosso, once the home of Clara. Perched like a

watch-tower on the peak, it seemed to defy Umbria lying at its feet. But to Orlando there came the thought that the building would fall in ruin, that the pride of its owners would be overwhelmed in death, and that of the rulers of Subasio every trace would perish, except the memory of that legendary night when a young girl left the castle, bearing in her heart an ideal of love that was to spread to the world's end.

The road passed upwards across shining, grassy slopes ; and the sun had burst forth in all his glory when Orlando reached the mountain top. A fresh breeze played over Subasio, carrying with it the scent of flowers and the cool memory of the snows that it had brushed in passing. Orlando stood motionless as he filled his lungs with the strong air ; he felt as

though his being was dissolving in the light. Whichever way he turned, as far as the eye could reach, the reddened peaks receded in the distance. The hills were crowned with the irregular tracery of wall-girt towns, whence lofty towers shot up to heaven. But his eyes loved most to dwell upon the Umbrian plain, between Spello, Foligno, Montefalco, and Assisi. Then he watched Perugia, glistening on its mountain-slope, and lower down the Trasimene Lake, spread out like a flaming liquid sun upon the earth. Nearer lay the green patch of familiar forests, the hermitages of St. Mary of the Angels and St. Damian, and the river with its tawny waters that disappeared towards the horizon. To him it seemed that from this remote corner a gospel of love had gone forth which would renew the face of the earth, and that

doubtless some day men would speak of Assisi as now they spoke of Bethlehem. . . . And across the intervening space he thought he saw the Master's gaze bent on him and watching him with passionate sweetness. Then he stretched himself on the ground ; he felt himself the only living being in that boundless solitude, as he murmured the words that embody the Franciscan ideal of humility :

“ My sister earth, grant me to be calm and pure and generous, even as thou art ! . . . ”

For the greater part of the day Orlando remained without moving on that same spot. He ceased to muse any longer. With eyes wide open, he seemed as though in a trance ; his life was merged in that of nature : he was nothing but an unconscious atom of the universe. This calm repose was sweet to him. Long he savoured it,

while the hours fled by and the sun traversed the heavens. When at length he saw it falling towards the west he rose regretfully, and in a fresh outburst of grief started on his return to the plain. He did not follow any road. With a sure foot he crossed straight down the grassy slopes, whose polished velvet reached to the forest's verge. When he passed beneath the trees, suddenly all the light was hidden from him. The shadow entered into his soul and despair seized hold of him. Instead of directing his steps towards St. Mary of the Angels, he turned towards St. Damian. Without any definite intention he felt himself drawn towards the hermitage by the strength of his love. Well he knew that once within the thickets that surrounded it, he would never dare to go away or content himself only with watching

the movements of the sisters, as they enjoy the freshness of the evening under the trees. Still he went there.

The forest became lighter. A stony path led him to St. Damian. He saw the little church between the poplars with the lime trees in front of the porch. Then he passed through into a clump of oaks, whence he could perceive the monastery. Suddenly he stopped, overcome with anguish ; he could scarcely repress a cry, as trembling he leaned against a tree. At a short distance from the chapel, in a scanty group of olive trees, there stood on a base of rough stone a little statue of the Virgin. Upon its mossy steps Simonetta was bowed in reverence. Orlando could scarcely see her face, hidden by the veil. But she appeared to him to be pale and sorrowful. Motionless, her head bent,

her hands joined over her knees, she seemed the very image of despair. Orlando felt his heart faint within him. Insensibly he approached her. Then, softly, he called her :

“ Simonetta ! . . . ”

She raised her head and cried, and got up quickly as though she would flee away across the forest. But Orlando moved towards her. He came quite close to her without speaking a word, but without ceasing to look at her with a glance so soft and so suppliant that she felt that she was conquered, and allowed herself to fall back on the stone in the same posture as she had been in an instant before.

“ Simonetta ! . . . ” he said again. And as she watched him in despair, on the point of bursting into sobs, he added quickly :
“ Why do you not speak to me ? Simonetta,

my sister, it seems that you do not know me, and I, indeed, I hardly recognise you."

"Go away ! . . ." murmured the young girl.

But the voice was scarcely audible, and Orlando read her words from the movement of her lips rather than from the sound.

"I am your brother," he said. "I am your brother, Simonetta : I have the right to see you and to speak to you. Why do you drive me away ? What have you to fear ? I have forgotten the past. I do not love you any more as I did, Simonetta. Now you are only my sister. You need have no more fear. I can speak to you and see you. Will you not allow me to do so ?"

Simonetta had risen slowly. Her eyes were full of tears and her lips trembled.

"Go away . . ." she repeated, clasping her hands.

“ Why ? why ? ” said Orlando violently, coming nearer to her. “ You have nothing to fear from me. My love is dead. I have killed it with every effort of my will ; I have obtained grace and forgetfulness of the past. Why do you drive me away ? ”

Simonetta regarded him with a frightened look. A groan escaped her, and she twisted her hands in despair.

“ Go away ! ” she said again. “ I beg you, go away ! . . . ”

“ Why do you drive me away ? You do not fear my love any more ? I have killed it, Simonetta, my sister. Then, why are you frightened unless you love me ? ”

“ Oh ! go ! ” cried Simonetta, throwing herself at his feet. “ At least have pity on me. You see that I love you ! . . . Go away ! . . . Go away ! . . . ”

Orlando seized her wrists and raised her. He watched her for an instant with a sort of wild joy. Then he gained control over himself and let her go.

“Forgive me ! . . .” he said. “Forgive me for what I have done. I wanted to try you, Simonetta. Could you believe that my love was dead ? . . . It can only die with me. . . . Nothing can stop my loving you, since God Himself has not been strong enough ! . . . But now, what is to happen to us ? ”

“Now, it is finished ! ” said Simonetta in a hard voice. “You have dragged from me a secret which I would not confess to myself. . . . You will not be happier and I shall suffer more. . . . This will be your punishment. Now, good-bye, Orlando. . . . It is I who will go.”

They looked at each other for a moment,

with the feeling that they could not separate in this way for ever. Orlando stretched out his arms : a sob rose to his lips :

“ Simonetta ! . . . ”

She drew back slowly and murmured again :

“ Good-bye ! . . . ”

Then she ran through the trees and entered the chapel and the door grated behind her. Orlando remained alone, crushed to the ground. He had neither the strength to weep nor to think. Only he seemed to have a great void within him, and to be drifting on a sea of mournful dreams and memories of past pain.

The sun was setting. Behind the trees the sky was covered as with a sheet of dark amethyst. By insensible gradations the colour changed from the purple of

the amethyst to tints of yellow, and then to the pale grey of a pearl. The first stars appeared. A shepherd returning from the mountain sang with a clear voice as he came along the path. Orlando, shaken with sobs and shivering with the cold of the night, did not move.

CHAPTER XX.

FROM their brief interview Orlando and Simonetta retained the impression of one moment of joy, in that they had seen each other : of a whole eternity of suffering in that they had said good-bye for ever. When, on the next day, Clara saw Simonetta, she divined the new trouble. Sitting down beside her on the terrace, she said in her grave voice :

“ Let us offer our griefs to God, my sister ! . . . ”

Simonetta looked at her and saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“ Clara ! . . . Clara, my sister ! what has happened ? who has made you weep ? . . . ”

Clara was silent for a moment.

“The Master is going to leave us,” she said at length. “It is for him that I weep. . . . Oh! if the sufferings of a second Messiah can ransom again the sins of men, the blackest hearts will be washed white. . . . Poverello! Poverello! . . . His dream was so beautiful that men thought themselves strong enough to realise it. Great and small, they came towards our mountains. They put on the robe of coarse cloth, they sang the songs of love, and the world seemed overspread with glorious flowers. . . . But, alas, the wind of ancient passion has arisen, and the flowers are faded! . . . To-day the Friars wish for riches, power, and influence. What is Francis now among the brethren whom he took unto himself? Some one to be respected yet at whom they smile, whose counsels they listen to without

dreaming of following them. His hopes die one by one, and the Poverello, each day, dies with them. Already his eyes are closing ; an inner fire seems to consume him ; and his smile has lost its hopefulness. As he says, he awaits, as for a release from toil, the moment when he will render account to God of his mission. To prepare himself for it, he is going to leave this corner of Umbria, so full of painful memories, and take refuge on Mount Alverno, in the silence of the rocks and of the pines, there to contemplate his whole life before it passes from him for ever.

“ His sufferings are those of the Saviour,” murmured Simonetta with a trembling voice. “ Mine are the ridiculous troubles of a child. Oh ! why can I not weep tears a thousand times more bitter and so

appease in some little measure his agony !
. . . I am ashamed of myself ! . . .”

Clara watched her for a long time, with that expression of anxious but clear-sighted love that mothers have for their children when they weep. At last she bent towards her and kissed her on the forehead.

“ Be brave ! ” she said. “ Hope still.”

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE leaving Portiuncula, which he might not see again, Francis wished to contemplate once more the whole extent of his kingdom : the water-courses among the olives, the embattled cities on their hills, the divine Assisi, whose houses rise like steps of gold upon the mountain side. For several days he discussed the proposed expedition with his companions.

“ I must collect all my strength,” he said. “ I wish to sing as I walk along the roads and to gather once for all, in my dying eyes, the beauty of creation. . . . You will come with me, my faithful Léon and Angelo, and you, Orlando, the silent one ; you will accompany me to the hills where flutters the caress of the summer winds.”

“Where shall we go, Master?” asked Léon.

“We will go to Caprilo, my brethren, if you will, and if God allows.”

“The road is long.”

“Our songs will shorten it! . . . On our way we will pass through Assisi, which I wish to see again. We shall be as we were of old in the enthusiasm of the first days, when all the warmth of the sun was in our voices, and when the stars, our little sisters of the night, were the golden jewels that adorned our dreams.”

The enthusiasm of the Poverello infected his disciples.

“We will follow you, Master, we will follow you! When shall we start?”

“Soon! . . . To-morrow . . . if I am strong enough. . . . I shall be strong . . .”

They set out one morning. Francis

leaned on a staff, freshly cut, on which there still remained some branches with their leaves. The hum of insects filled the air. Near a hut, a cock poured out in the light his indefatigable cry.

They crossed the plain, burnt up by the sun and covered with a blinding dust. Francis went first, Orlando, Léon, and Angelo followed a few paces behind. The Poverello kept his eyes half closed. Across those drooping lids he saw the world as through a mist, that varied with the play of light from tints of mauve to tints of pink. The fields were deserted. In an all-enshrining dust the four Friars climbed towards Assisi.

When they reached it by the alley-ways, narrow as crevices in the hills, they were astounded at the depression in which the heat had plunged the town. The doors

were shut. No human sound showed any sign of life among its dwellings. The houses seemed to be weighed down by the sun. From the plain there rose always, across the silence, the cry of the amorous cock. In the city there was nothing living, save the brightness and the dazzling shimmer of the air against the fixed cascades of shadow that fell from the lines of the houses and the corners of the sloping streets.

The passage of the Friars, however, did not long remain unnoticed. Doubtless some one enjoying the freshness of the air behind his barred windows saw the four Friars who disturbed the city's calm. Immediately the news spread through the lanes and up the alley-steps. The Friars had not crossed a third of the town before the people were at their doors, excited and glad. It was a long time since Francis

had come up to Assisi. His fellow-townsmen spoke of him as of a legendary being. He was the Saint, who lived apart, and from whose hands miracles poured forth unceasingly. When they learnt of his presence, they rushed out with beating hearts, as at the coming of a God. On he came in front of his brethren. His eyes were almost closed, as he could not endure the glare of the light upon the stones. His cheeks, set in the short black beard, were pale and sunken. His hair, which he wore after the manner of the monks, seemed, in the distance, like the crown of thorns that adorned the brow of Jesus. He looked weak and ill. Still, he was gay. His youth had once more risen to the surface of his soul. The very stones of Assisi seemed to come towards him, trembling with love, to embrace their child ; and he

felt his heart expand as though to absorb, in an all-embracing flame, the city that had given him birth.

“ The Saint ! . . . the Saint ! . . . ”

The long-drawn cry re-echoed through the streets. Around Francis and his companions a procession was quickly formed, escorting them with joyous cries, with blessings and with prayers. Men hustled each other in order to touch the cord of their girdles, and women, prostrate on the ground, sought their footprints with their lips. Sick children were brought to them. Francis would caress them with his hand, and the mothers, in their rags, would rush away as though they feared that some one would rob them of a treasure, shouting as they ran :

“ The Saint has cured him ! . . . The Saint has cured him ! . . . ”

Two priests, seated on the wall of a well, watched the tumult quietly.

“ One must let the people amuse themselves a little,” said the elder of the two. “ They obey the established rules, but they love those who do not obey them.”

“ Think you not that there is some hostility to the Church in the love they bear to Francis ? ”

“ Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . ” replied the old priest smiling. “ But he will soon be one of us ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ The mercy of God is infinite, and poor Francis is very ill. . . . We shall sanctify him ! ”

But already the Friars had gone out of the town, leaving behind them a sound of festival.

They passed through the St. James’

gate. Under the olives and the flowering acacias, in the languid scent of the white hyacinths that covered the ground, a pathway led winding down the mountain to the valley of the Tescio. On their left, at the bottom of the ravine, the Friars could see the bridge with its pointed arch, over which they were soon to cross the river. A keen breeze blew from the ring of mountains that opened out before them. Francis walked down the path rapidly. He breathed deeply, enjoying to the full the air of the mountains. Exulting in his youth regained, he would sometimes turn towards his companions, and call to them :

“Come, lazy fellows ! Are you tired ? See how the earth has made herself beautiful to receive us ! ”

And Léon, and Angelo, and Orlando followed him, all infected by the gaiety of

him who was sometimes called the Sun of Souls.

As soon as they had crossed the Tescio bubbling over its red stony bed, the Friars began to climb again. The path was bad, slippery, and full of stones. They went slowly, Francis leaning on his staff. He talked no more, fearing to waste even a particle of his strength. He moved onwards with one thought only—to reach the summit. His companions respected his silence and regulated their pace by his. It took them nearly two hours to reach the gentle curve which the ridge of Caprilo forms against the sky. Then Francis gave vent to a cry of triumph:

“God has sustained me! . . . God has sustained me along the road! . . . What freshness there is here, what beauty, what joy!”

The strong keen wind of the mountains surged over the heights.

“ You will be cold, Master . . .” said Orlando.

For answer Francis shook his head. His soul was lost in ecstasy at the immensity before him. Turning towards the road along which they had just passed, with outstretched arm he pointed to the mountain immediately opposite to them.

“ Assisi ! . . . our Assisi ! . . .”

The little town was stretched before their gaze, less regular in appearance than when seen from the other slope. Rough, wild, of warrior aspect, it seemed inaccessible. Below the town plunged the great cliffs of Subasio in a chaos of huge red and yellow stones.

“ Assisi, that hast cradled us . . .” murmured the Poverello, his arms outspread

in a gesture of adoration, " Assisi . . . wilt thou see us die ? "

His companions remained silent. Around them the solitude was complete. No noise reached the summit of the mountain ; only the scarcely distinguishable sound of the millions of insects that live in the grass enwrapped them with a gentle but continuous murmur which was almost lost in the vibration of the clear air.

Francis turned towards the north.

Across the great slopes of radiant and luxuriant green, the eye ranged to the horizon, where earth and heaven met in a zone of blue. Above lay a broad band of mauve, sprinkled with powdery rays of sunshine. The rest of the sky was silver grey, pale and immaterial, in a shimmer of dazzling light. The mountains stood out in the distance in undefined blue. One

peak dominated the rest, sharp and gloomy' like a rocky needle jutting out of the heart of the forests. The Poverello watched it for a long time.

"Alverno! . . ." he said at last. "I see from here the place where I feel that God will reveal to me my destiny. From there I shall be able to dream of Assisi, and I shall recall the moments we have just passed. . . . Promise me, my brethren, that you will not forget them! . . ."

His companions threw themselves at his feet.

"Never, Master! . . . until our last hour! . . . You are our father and our friend: how shall we forget you? . . . O Master, who shall tell you of our love?"

Pale and trembling, his eyes fixed on the mountain that was to be his Calvary, the Poverello remained silent. On their knees

around him, his disciples kissed his hands and wept. They were lost in a dream that carried them beyond the limits of the world. A quenchless thirst for love consumed their hearts. The solitude enwrapped them.

CHAPTER XXII.

THREE months had passed since Francis and his faithful companions had left the mountains of Umbria to enjoy on Mount Alverno, far from all the habitations of mankind, the contemplative solitude of the Thebaid. This retirement of the Master had spread a kind of silent shadow over the Order. By his absence he was magnified. He was no longer the Saint to whom all had access, whose voice proclaimed at the cross-roads the glory of his God ; he appeared rather as a Redeemer, who suffered by the deceit and perfidy of men and who abandoned them to weep over them.

At the end of the third month Italy was thrilled with a sudden tremor. In two

days the cry passed through the land from end to end. Men's hearts beat faster, their souls reeled under the mysterious storm : awe, mingled with joy and terror, oppressed them. They cried to the winds that blow :

“ A miracle ! a miracle ! . . . Christ is born again ! . . . Francis has received the marks of the five wounds of Jesus ! . . . A miracle ! . . . a miracle ! . . . The Saint of Umbria is the Son of God ! ”

When the Sisters at St. Damian heard the news of the wonder, they embraced each other in sudden ecstasy. They did not dream of doubting : it was so natural that the Master should receive the visit of God ! He had suffered so much ; over the ruin of his dreams he had wept so many mortal tears ! But God had inclined towards him, and marking him with the scars of the Crucified one, had proclaimed

him His child and placed him on His right hand, on the steps of the throne. It was but natural justice, the looked-for requital of his labours ! . . .

Clara passed a whole night on her knees before the altar of the Virgin, in an ecstasy of unmeasured joy. She was divinely happy, and her eyes were full of tears. She wished to pray, but could not control her thoughts. Her soul was filled with a single image : she saw the Poverello standing before her, his arms outstretched, smiling that enigmatic and sorrowful smile, his look lost in celestial visions, and bearing on his body the five terrible wounds which made him equal to the Christ ! . . . Momentarily, the all-absorbing figure would disappear : then Clara would dream for a moment :

“ I shall see him ! I shall see him ! . . .

We shall go to meet him. We will prostrate ourselves before him. We will say to him, 'Master!' . . . He will reply: 'My sisters! . . .' Oh! . . . to cleanse our lips in the dust of his feet! To bathe them with our tears! To warm them on our hearts! Oh Master! . . . Francis! Adored Master, when will you come back to us? "

Then he would appear to her, motionless and sad, raising over humanity his wounded hands, and a thrill of horror and of tenderness would pass through her frame.

Around her, her companions were praying. The chapel was bright with flaming candles. The little bell clanged desperately as the Friar who was in charge of it threw into its peal all the joyfulness of his own heart.

The peasants in their huts, the people

of Assisi in their stone houses, the beggars on the highways, the lepers at the cross-roads, all repeated the unexpected news : all, with all their strength, hoped for the return of the Master.

He came back.

Rumour, that moves over the highways more quickly than man can travel, preceded him at a distance throughout his journey. He had scarcely left Alverno when the report of his departure crept into the huts of his brethren at St. Mary of the Angels, and the Sisters at St. Damian received it at the same instant. Every thought turned to the moment of his arrival, and the days of waiting were filled with his image.

He came by painful stages, his body broken, his soul elate, moving to the irregular step of a small ass which itself was already caught up in a whirling cloud

of legend. Léon and Orlando followed him. A peasant walked beside him, and with his holly stick urged on with all respect the ass that was so fortunate as to carry a Saint. The story of the miracle spread through the villages. The heralds of it had been some shepherds who were watching their goats at the foot of Mount Alverno. They related what they had seen. In the evening, around the wells, in the villages by the mud huts, women would put down their copper water-pots and revel in the story, with sudden cries of joy and then mysterious whispers, a finger on the lips, and the eyes raised to heaven.

“For forty days he fasted and prayed in the woods of Mount Alverno, among the birds and the wild beasts, celebrating the fast of my Lord St. Michael the Archangel. Then on the Eve of the Elevation of the

Holy Cross, he had a vision. An angel appeared to him and said :

“ ‘ Be strong. Prepare thyself to receive with patience and gentleness the will of God.’

“ The Poverello replied :

“ ‘ I am always ready.’

“ On which the angel disappeared.

“ The next day, being the very Day of the Cross, Francis, well before the dawn, was praying in front of his hut. He said to the Lord :

“ ‘ O Lord ! make me to feel, in my soul and in my body, all the sufferings of Thy Passion ! . . . ’

“ And even as he prayed, he contemplated within himself the Passion of Christ and His unbounded charity. And by the strength of his dream and of his meditation, ardour and love and compassion increased

so much within him that he became even as Jesus. Then, suddenly, from the depth of heaven he saw coming towards him a Seraphim, with six flaming wings, who carried before him the image of a man crucified. Immediately the mountain was wrapped in flame from top to bottom, lighting up the neighbouring hills and valleys as though the sun had fallen on the earth. Indeed so bright it was that some muleteers in the inns, seeing the dazzling light which shone in through the windows, thought it was daybreak, and saddled and loaded their beasts; and as they marched, they saw those wondrous flames begin to wane, while the real sun rose on the horizon. . . . But this flaming of Mount Alverno had marked the hour of an awful mystery! Even as it disappeared, the seraphic vision had left in the heart

of Francis the spark of the divine love; and in his flesh the very image of the Passion of Christ. Gradually on the hands and feet of the Poverello there appeared the marks of the nails that had pierced the limbs of the Saviour on the day of sacrifice : and in his right side there gaped a bleeding wound, on the very spot where Jesus was smitten by the spear ! . . . Then Francis, all dismayed, gave thanks to the Lord and sobbed with joy, and his brethren, when they saw him, prostrated themselves before him, and adored the five glorious scars from which flashed rays of gold. . . .”

Such was the story that was framed after a few days, and that was repeated, always identical, around the fountains and in the courtyards of the churches.

Meanwhile Francis, bearing his scars,

was returning towards the cradle of the Order, and at his every step miracles blossomed from the wayside dust. He came, always absorbed in his dream, and almost loosed from human bonds. Exulting crowds of peasants ran to meet him from the villages. They threw themselves down before him with outstretched arms, crying out to him, and trying to touch his garments. Léon and Orlando protected him from the crush and from unintended blows. In the throng of heads that pressed towards him, one could scarcely see his little frightened ass, or him, pale and smiling, who blessed men but saw them not.

Near the village of San Sepolcro the peasants came from the farms scattered over the hills, bearing branches of olives in their hands. Waving them in frenzy, and advancing in a cloud of dust, they cried :

“ The Saint ! . . . Behold the Saint ! . . . ”

He went amongst them, his hands raised, his eyes half closed. When, towards evening, he had passed through all these crowds, he asked suddenly :

“ Are we nearing a village ? ”

He had seen nothing. He had heard neither the cries of joy nor the prayers that rose towards him. He had not perceived the thousands who had saluted him, and his anxious companions could no longer recognise the Divine Minstrel whose voice had charmed them.

One day, however, he came back to himself. He felt so weak that he feared he would never be able to complete the journey he had undertaken. He looked at his friends as though he had met them again after a long absence.

“ For pity’s sake,” he murmured, “ let

us stop. Let me rest and recover the little strength that remains to me. . . . The kiss of God has consumed me. . . . Let me take a long rest until I feel strong enough to resume my journey home, and to go and die at the place where I was born ! ”

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE winter had come before Francis could resume his journey ; but his sadness had left him, and his soul, freed from the visions that had ravaged it, beamed with a new love. He could speak, he could smile again.

“ When the lark,” he said, “ feels that her death is nigh, she collects all her strength, and, rushing heavenwards in a single bound, salutes the light with the most beautiful cry of joy that she has ever uttered. We, in our earthen-coloured robes, are like the lark. At the moment of death let us sing for the last time, and let our divine sister, the earth with its innumerable paths, be thrilled with joy at our song ! . . . ”

At St. Mary of the Angels and at St. Damian the impatience was extreme. The noise of the daily miracles hummed unceasingly around the hermitage. The Friars were a little annoyed at the capricious route followed by the Master, who seemed anxious to see again all the places he had loved, before returning for the last time to the home of his first youth. The Sisters tried to shorten the days of waiting by prayer. Clara called to her mystic lover with all the fervour of her soul, and Simonetta trembled a little at the thought that, by the Master's side, she would doubtless see him whom she had never ceased to love.

It was on a fine December morning that Francis reappeared. He came by the road from Perugia. Messengers had announced his coming. By hundreds the

Friars started out to meet him. St. Mary and St. Damian were deserted: the only living things that remained there were the flames of the candles. The Poor Men, clothed in their rough brown robes, hurried along, chanting their canticles with a voice that filled the air: in their hands they waved branches torn from the evergreen oaks; it was as though a moving forest was advancing towards him who bore the scars of Christ. Clara went first. She alone did not sing. Love and joy were too much for her. There was only one thought in her mind: she was going to see him.

Suddenly the deep sound of a distant chant reached them: it was Perugia, which was following the Saint. The Poor Men increased their pace. Panting along, with hands outstretched and their brown garments waving in the wind, they were

almost running. They stopped singing, that they might go more quickly. Then, louder, already near, increasing every moment, there came to them the Perugian chant. They began to shout :

“ Francis ! . . . Francis ! . . . Our Master ! . . . ”

“ O Saint ! . . .

“ Son of God ! . . .

“ Image of Christ ! . . . ”

They shouted as they ran, and Clara, pale and worn out, but radiant, preceded them. Suddenly, at a bend of the road, the two processions met face to face. They stopped abruptly. From both sides a storm of cries arose.

“ Francis ! . . . Francis ! . . . ”

For an instant he stood still, overcome by the emotion of his return. Then he advanced alone, with arms outstretched,

towards his own people. Clara threw herself forward, and when she was near him, fell down as though she were dead. She sank upon the bare ground, and, weeping, kissed with her burning lips the feet of the Master. A sudden silence spread over the plain. All knelt, their eyes full of tears and ecstasy, and the Man of Assisi, erect above the prostrate crowd, blessed them with his bleeding hands.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLARA wished to keep Francis near her. Almost immediately after his return, he was possessed of a sadness he could not hide, and felt weaker. He no longer found among his brethren the simple affection of past times. God had marked him with the seal of the elect. Men knelt before him when he stretched out to them his arms. Ill and failing, with dim, unseeing eyes consumed by tears, he set out again in spite of all. No prayer could prevail against his longing : he had need of space and of freedom.

He traversed Umbria in every part for several months, stopping only when his sufferings constrained him, and continuing his journey at the first improvement. But

his fellow-countrymen adored him from a distance. The Ministers of the Order thought the wishes of a Saint impracticable for mortals, and without a care for him sought to reduce the grand Franciscan dream to the measure of the convents. The world grew distant from the Poverello and kept him in an honoured isolation, which he peopled with his own despair.

Clara without difficulty divined his trouble.

“Stop with us!” she said to him each time he passed. “Your Sisters are faithful to your ideal: you will find in them so many watchful friends. We will heal your wounds, we will sing your songs. Formerly you gave us brethren to serve us, now it is our turn to serve you. We will talk of the past.”

“That was too beautiful a dream. . . .”

“It has been realised! God has proclaimed you to be His child: how is it that your heart does not burst with pride?”

“The Order is dying! How is it that my heart does not break with grief?”

Clara drew near him and placed a caressing arm on his shoulder.

“Stay near us! . . . I know of a pond in the forest near our garden. The birds and beasts of the woods come there to drink. My sisters and I will go and build upon its bank a hut of reeds. The breeze in the rustling canes will sing to you melodies sweet as any music of the flute. No one shall trouble you, if you wish to be alone. When you want to see us, a few steps only will bring you amongst us.”

Clara's voice, the glance of her eyes which seemed to hold in them the light of all the world, her gesture, her smile, were

for the Poverello of an irresistible tenderness. Lovingly he looked at her. Calm and noble, she still smiled, but her lips began to tremble a little, and the tears rose to her eyes.

“ Clara, my sister, in your soul I can see nought but love and holiness. . . .”

“ It is the mirror in which you contemplate your own ! ”

* * * *

The Poverello dwelt in a little hut of reeds that the Sisters built for him. Each day discreet hands decked the threshold with flowers. Slowly the peace of nature fell upon his mind. It seemed to him sometimes that his sufferings were appeased, that his being was melting away in a kind of torpor, and that at last he would enjoy the sweetness of non-existence. He hoped for death as for a deliverance.

Each evening, at the hour when evil memories rise from the shadows, Clara would come to see him, bringing to him her motherly love. To revive some little joy in his heart, she would make him recall the most dazzling moments of his miraculous life. But he found a special attraction in the simplicity of the early days: the harvests with the peasants, the grape-gathering sonorous with laughter, the good country-folk who came to swell the new host, that they might taste, under the rough cloth robe, the happiness of Divine Poverty.

“Then we were gay Minstrels!” he would repeat. “To-day, my brethren read the breviary and speak Latin. . . . And I, I am an egoist, and I am disgusted with my faint-heartedness. I am abandoning the wandering life to live near you in comfort,

O my Sister Clara, and men hear me no more."

"Renew your strength, Master, renew your strength! When that has come back, you will start out again and sing with a voice so strong that all the world will be moved! . . ."

Amid this alluring tenderness the Poverello was almost happy. Like clear water, his soul was sensitive to every play of light, and his companions filled it with brightness. As he walked along the mossy paths, he saw them passing between the trees, curious and shy, but always reassured by his smile, always ready to confide to him their little gossipy but charming secrets. He had his favourites—Sister Illuminata, who foretold the future and who, with her fixed gaze, seemed to follow the unrolling of an uninterrupted dream;

Sister Amata who had retained the roguishness of a child ; Sister Simonetta, the most cherished, perhaps, both of Clara and of Francis : she was always silent, enwrapped in mystery, her eyes burning with fever. Francis and Clara knew her secret, and did not try to cure her distress with the sound of words. They pitied her. They pitied him whom she loved and who, like her, was sunk in silence and despair. When the Poverello met Simonetta in his walks or near the pond, which she loved, he would stop and talk simply to her of the beauty of the world, of the flowers on the earth, of the waters in the meadows, of the stars—the golden sand of the heavenly shores. She would listen enthralled, her hands clasped, her great thoughtful eyes fixed on his, and would forget for a moment the grief that tormented her. But the

Poverello did not forget : and as he left he would say :

“ Hope, Simonetta ! Hope always ! . . . ”

She was hoping for forgetfulness.

But he, in his intercourse with God, prayed for these two children who were expiating so hardly their love, and he asked the Divine Physician if so many tears had not washed away the sin and had not earned a pardon.

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER a hot stormy day Simonetta left her cell, where she could not sleep, and went out to wander at hazard in the cool of the night.

Having gone a little distance she turned back. Surrounded by trees, the Chapel of St. Damian formed a dark mass above which rose a few cypress trees, their tops silvered by the moonlight. In the distance the noise of a torrent could be heard as it rolled over the rocks down the slopes of Subasio. It seemed, in the brightness of the starry night, that the sides of the mountain were covered with a sprinkling of snow : it was the fleecy clumps of olive trees, spreading over the earth their delicate embroidery. The scent of the woods filled

the air, as the wind, sweeping through them, brought with it the odour of the pines.

Simonetta went towards the pond. She could see its glitter between the trees. There was upon its banks a special spot where she loved to linger. Some old lilacs which had grown into trees formed there a dense thicket.

Simonetta sat down on a large stone. Her hands clasped on her knees, her eyes fixed on the water, over which the moon and the clouds pursued each other in a rapid play of light, she tried to think only of the beauty of the night and to stifle the voice of her heart.

She had been sitting thus for some time, and gradually had lost herself in reverie, when suddenly she started up : there was a step behind her. She turned and saw

Orlando, pale and motionless ; only his eyes seemed living.

“ Oh ! ” she said, letting herself fall back on the stone, and placing her hand over her heart. “ How you frightened me, my brother ! . . . ”

He did not answer. She could scarcely see him, shrouded as he was in the shadow of the trees, except for his paleness and the brightness of his eyes. To hide her trouble she tried to speak, but her voice and her thoughts moved at random.

“ Look ! ” she murmured, “ how sweet the night is ! It seems almost like a night of summer. The moon looks like pure gold. . . . The air is warm. . . . A mist floats like a veil over the pond. . . . ”

Orlando sat down beside her. He gazed at her with desperate tenderness : it

seemed as though his eyes would never close their lids again.

“ You hurt me ! ” said Simonetta in a low voice, turning her head away.

She was pale and trembling.

“ I must go away . . . ” he said at length. “ I shall go very far, I know not where, to the East perhaps ; and I shall not return. . . . For, if I cannot live near you, then far from you I can but die. . . . You understand, my trouble is stronger than I : I cannot even keep silence ! My love seems like to break my heart and burst out around me in a flame. . . . Oh ! if you knew how I suffer, how you would pity me ! . . . I can no longer hope for forgetfulness, I can no longer believe myself when I try to lie. . . . I see only too clearly that I shall love you always ! I should have died long ago :

still I live. . . . But what a life ! . . . Oh ! Simonetta, I love you ! I thirst for you, I would live always near you, and I tell it you now at last, for the last time, because I cannot be silent any longer and because I am going away ! . . . ”

Simonetta, in her dismay, had risen.

“ Orlando, I beg you ! be silent ! . . . I must not listen to you when you talk like this ! . . . The same obstacles separate us always, and we have put another between us which forbids us to recall the past. . . . Until now our souls were pure . . . Our silence was our safeguard. . . . We had only spoken once, and I wished to forget it. . . . You should have done the same. . . . Now ! oh, the pain of it ! Why do you hurt me so ? Why do you hurt me ? ”

“ I could not be silent any more. I could not. . . . Oh ! why has God willed that

I should love you? And why has He allowed you to love me? For you love me still, Simonetta; you love me as I love you!"

"No! . . . I do not love you any more, except as a brother!"

"You love me! You love me with all your woman's heart."

"It is not true! It is not true!" cried Simonetta in terror.

"Ah! your love speaks to me through your terror! . . . I only wished to hear this cry of anguish! For the second time you have betrayed yourself! You love me! . . . You love me! . . . Now, yes, now, I can go away and you will see me no more. I go, but with the certainty of your love. . . . I shall go and think only of you, until I die! . . . Do you forgive me, Simonetta?"

“I forgive you. . . . I forgive you at least the evil you have done me. . . . Now, I beseech you, leave me! Go away! Your voice tortures me. . . . Go, my brother, I beg you.”

Overcome with emotion, she fell back on the stone and sobbed, her head buried in her hands. Orlando threw himself down beside her and took her in his arms.

“Do not weep because of me, Simonetta! . . . You must not weep! . . .”

All distraught, she tried to tear herself from his embrace. With a quivering voice she implored him :

“Leave me, Orlando! Leave me! . . . You will kill me! . . .”

Torn by a mortal anguish, she felt Orlando's heart beating against her own. The night whirled about her, and the starry heavens swam before her eyes.

“Leave me!” she cried at last . . .
“Orlando, leave me. . . . We are lost ! . . .
I love you ! . . .”

Throwing all her remaining strength into one desperate effort, she succeeded in escaping from his embrace. But it was only for an instant. She fell back in his arms, then at his feet, moaning with clasped hands :

“Pity ! . . . my brother, have pity.”

“It is of God that one must ask for pity,” said a grave voice near them.

Each uttered a cry, and turning they saw the Poverello, who, erect in the shadow of the thicket, was watching them with anxious tenderness.

Simonetta covered her face with her hands.

“I am ashamed, my father ! . . . I am ashamed ! . . .”

But Francis bent towards her and raised her. Orlando knelt before him.

“ I alone am guilty . . . I shall go away. . . . I will offer my life for the glory of the Lord. Do you think that some day He will forgive me ? ”

Francis stretched out his hand to him.

“ Rise, my brother ; I am the meanest of men, and no one should kneel to me, who am so stained with sin. . . . But I may speak to you as an elder brother. . . . You shall not go away. ”

“ I beg you, let me go ! ”

“ He must go ! He must go ! ” cried Simonetta with a breaking voice. “ Let him go ! Separate us, my father, since we cannot tear our hearts asunder ! Separate us for our salvation ! ”

“ There are other ways of salvation than by suffering,” answered the Man of Assisi.

“ Jesus wishes to be loved with joy and not with tears. He has imposed these trials on you that through them you might gain the right to love each other in spite of what has passed. He will tell me the hour of pardon. Hope on and see each other without fear, for I am your Master and I allow it, until the time comes when I may release you and unite you ! . . . ”

A warm breeze glided over the still waters of the pond. The brilliant moon dug in it a well of gold, and the stars glittered between the leaves of the trees. The Poverello stretched out his scarred hands to the two young people. They bent down, and pressing them against their lips, bathed them with their tears.

“ Be not sad ! ” said Francis.

In the silence they parted, he towards St. Mary of the Angels, she to St. Damian.

A boundless joy filled their hearts. The darkness for them was more radiant than the sun in June.

CHAPTER XXVI.

As once during a hard winter Francis had seen a mass of roses blooming miraculously in the snow, so now, after a long sojourn at St. Damian, he felt a new ardour spread through his limbs. He thought he was saved. Joy reigned again among the faithful. The sound of happy voices was heard in the hermitages. It was an unexpected dawn, after twilight. Followed by his brethren, the Master tried his strength in the forest paths. His spirits rose and he decided that he would depart soon for Tuscany, and would proclaim once more along the roads the praise of Christ.

“ I am meditating,” he said to his companions, “ I am meditating a song for us alone. I shall compose it if God inspires

me. It will be such that when they hear it, all will cry out at once: 'Behold the Friars! . . . Behold the Minstrels of God! . . .' And, as it will be simple and easy, all men will sing it with us."

To which Clara, smiling, replied:

"Doubtless in your heart you know it already, this song of which you speak. Tell it to us now, my brother!"

But he would turn away his head with malicious gaiety.

"The hour is not yet come, my impatient sister! I have not yet learnt the whole song from the angels, for it is they who are teaching it to me. Each night, in my sleep, I hear it lull me. It peoples the darkness with delightful dreams. At the break of day I can repeat a few words. But much escapes me, and I await its return. When God has well taught me

the Chant of the Angels, I will teach it to you, my sisters, to you first of all : then to my brethren, who are good soldiers ; and then to the wide world, to whom I shall bequeath it, so that when I am dead, the Poverello will not be forgotten ! . . .”

They used to see him wandering under the trees along the streams, in the rippling freshness of the running waters. In the evening for long hours he would contemplate the stars. Silent and absorbed he seemed lost in reverie. One day, with a deep cry of joy, he came back to himself. It was after the midday meal taken in common, in the shady forest, under the warmth of a caressing breeze. Suddenly he drew himself up, transfigured with joy and radiant with a flame that burned within him. His hands trembled, his voice quivered. He cried :

“ Listen ! . . . Listen to the Song of the Angels ! . . . the Chant of Creation ! . . . ”

For an instant he remained silent, his hands uplifted, his eyes burning, as though he was admiring, with all the strength of his being, the beauty of a priceless jewel. His motionless companions watched him anxiously, holding their breath and hearing only the beating of their own hearts. He began in a low and trembling voice, which quickly grew louder under the vault of the trees :

Praise be to the Lord ! . . .

Most High ! Most Powerful ! Good Lord !

To Thee alone be praise, honour, glory, and thanksgiving.

All, all is due, O Lord, to Thee alone,

And no man living is worthy to name Thy name !

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, with all Thy creatures ;

But especially to my Lord the Sun, our brother,

Who gives us day, and through whom Thou shinest !

For he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,

He is the symbol of Thee, O most Highest !

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Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our sister, Moon, and
the Stars

Which Thou hast formed in heaven, clear and precious
and beautiful !

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our brother, Wind,
And for the air, and the clouds ; the clear sky and
every kind of weather

Through which Thou givest sustenance to Thy
creatures !

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our sister, Water,
For she is most useful and humble and precious and
pure.

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our brother, Fire,
With which Thou dost illumine the night,
For he is beautiful, and joyous, and strong, and
brave !

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our mother, Earth,
Which sustains and governs us,
And produces diverse fruits, with coloured plants
and herbs.

Praise and bless the Lord, and give thanks to Him,
And serve Him with great humility ! *

* The original text of this Canticle of Creation will be
found in the Appendix.

Slowly the Poverello lowered his hands.
From every side murmurs of joy and admiration arose.

“ It is the voice of God Himself ! . . .

“ It will be our marching song !

“ Our triumphal hymn !

“ Praise be to Thee, O Lord !

“ How he spoke of the beauty of the earth !

“ How he spoke of the beauty of the sun !

“ We are indeed the brethren of everything, since God has created all !

“ Praise be to Thee, O Father Universal !

“ He said : ‘ Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for all Thy creatures ! . . . ’ And I will say : ‘ Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our brother, Francis ! For Thou hast made him humble and gracious, full of mercy and loving-kindness, and his soul shines among

other souls as Thy sun shines among the stars ! ' "

It was Léon who, as with a loud voice he uttered the praise of the Master, knelt before him and gazed at him with eyes full of tears of joy. Clara too had knelt. In the hymn of the Poverello she recognised the heavenly accents. She doubted not that God Himself had inspired it, and all her fragile body trembled at the miracle. But sorrow darkened her joy. She feared that it was only by a supreme and final effort that the Man of Assisi could have produced this brilliant flame. So she remained motionless, kneeling on the ground, with hands outstretched towards him. She did not speak, but in all her being there was expressed a love without limit, an enthusiasm mingled with fear and anguish and the terror of death.

The Poverello raised her.

“ Does it please you, this song that the angels have taught me in the cell that you have built for me, my sister ? Does it please you, Clara, light of my life ? ”

“ It shines with all the splendours of which it sings,” replied the virgin. “ O Master, repeat it to me, repeat to us, so that we may learn it, this Canticle of Creation ! ”

Francis smiled happily.

“ Listen ! ” he said, “ you must learn it quickly. When you know it, we shall depart. We shall go and repeat it throughout the earth. And when in their turn all men know it, they will love God with a boundless love. They will say with us :

Most High ! Most Powerful ! Good Lord !

To Thee alone be praise, honour, glory, and thanksgiving.

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All, all is due, O Lord, to Thee alone,
And no man living is worthy to name Thy name !

Under the evergreen oaks the chant, repeated by the Friars and their companions, rose and floated away over the forest. All stood around Francis, and with their eyes fixed on him, seemed to sing the loving verses to his glory ; but he, as he uttered them, looked up to heaven, and from his burning heart there rose to God, as from a censer, the perfume of all the prayers of men.

CHAPTER XXVII.

It was necessary to teach mankind the new chant.

Worn out and dying, his eyes closed against the light, and so tired that he stumbled along the roads, the Poverello moved out to new conquests. The Sisters at St. Damian hid their tears from him. Clara only begged him to bless them. But when he and his followers had passed away down the plain, when, from the rose-bowered terrace, their robes could no longer be seen amid the thickets, she felt her courage fail. She turned towards her sisters, and was not ashamed to share their tears. Her voice was broken by sobs, as she said to them :

“ Let us pray for him, may be that we shall see him no more ! . . . ”

Once again Umbria thrilled to the coming of the Master. His Order had become a stranger to him ; but the grape-gatherers perched on their ladders, who pick the bunches garlanded round the elms, and the shepherds, who pass the summer on the hills, so close to heaven and the angels, and the peasants who plough the fields, the women who chatter at the fountains, the small folk of the towns—all these, whose life was rough and whose heart was simple, remained disciples of his Gospel. When they knew that in his nightly visions the Poverello had learnt from the angels a song that entranced men’s souls, a joyous ardour drove them to his side. They abandoned everything, in quiet confidence that, as they went to please Him, God

would take care of what they left behind. Thus they hurried towards the Saint, across the forests now turning red in the autumn-tide, using the beds of the torrents, where the stones roll down, to descend more quickly the slopes of the mountains.

The Poverello and his companions came across the plains. They were at Rieti, and in the square in front of the Church, in the midst of a swaying crowd, they sang the *Chant of Creation*. The good folk knew it already; for more quickly than the Poverello his work had moved before him, and Umbria, all wonder-struck, repeated it unceasingly. When he had uttered the two first stanzas, some timid voices joined with his to sing the next; and then hundreds of others followed, firm and loud, and it seemed like the song of a

whole world, which, breaking its bonds, went soaring up to God.

He went to Mount Colombo, passing through the hermitages of the forests and the hills, and filling them with an odour of sanctity. All along the road, in the hours of fatigue, his brave companions, Léon, Angelo, and Orlando, intoned the song of love :

Most High ! Most Powerful ! Good Lord !

To Thee alone be praise, honour, glory, and thanksgiving.

All, all is due, O Lord, to Thee alone,

And no man living is worthy to name Thy name !

The peasants followed hard upon their steps : they collected the stones on which Francis had stumbled, and straightway the stones worked miracles. But he himself each day became more and more detached from life, and entered more and more into that mysterious region where souls con-

verse with God. His eyes could no longer discern light from darkness. He walked sustained by his brethren, stiff, his head erect, his cheeks all sunken under his black beard. All his strength was in his voice. Dying, he seemed to press on irresistibly towards new horizons. Thus he passed from solitude to solitude, as the minstrels go from manor to manor. He could no longer see the beauty of nature, but the verses of his Canticle proclaimed the vision of it that he retained in his soul.

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, with all Thy creatures,
 But especially to my Lord, the Sun, our brother,
 Who gives us day, and through whom Thou shinest,
 For he is beautiful, and radiant with great splendour,
 He is the symbol of Thee, O Most Highest.

In the evening, when he was resting in a cell or at a farm, his companions, crouched

on the ground, their elbows on their knees and their heads bowed upon their hands, talked quietly and showed clearly their distress.

“ It is a miracle that he can still go on !

“ His legs tremble. At every step his arms weigh more heavily on ours.

“ His wounds bleed continuously. He is losing all his heart’s blood.

“ He is almost blind. Alone, he would stumble against the rocks and trees.

“ What would happen if he should die on this pilgrimage ?

“ Oh ! to be able to give him some of our life !

“ To cure him !

“ To save him ! . . . ”

But he never complained. Quiet as a child, he allowed the doctors to burn his forehead ; it was, they said, a sure means

of restoring his sight. He scarcely quivered when they brought the red-hot irons. He murmured :

“ Be kind to me, divine Fire . . . my brother ! . . . ”

Then he surrendered himself to the useless torture. Without a groan he bore the pain of wounds that took long to heal. They were scarcely healed when he started forth again. Winter had come : deep snow lay over the land : the mountains were lost in the heavy grey sky that covered the horizon. The cypresses stood out above the snow like long black arrows that bent and whistled in the wind. But always, at the approach of the procession, the peasants crowded along the roads and in the fields, and the *Chant of Creation* caressed all hearts like a breath of spring.

Later he went to Sienna, for after his

own country-folk the Tuscans were nearest to his heart. They, who never thought to see him again, felt a keen joy when his early coming was announced. The watchman, who observes the highways from the top of the tower, had a special mission to watch attentively the southern roads and to announce by his bell the arrival of the Saint. Meanwhile the Guilds waited thrilling with impatience, and the artists were busy renewing the gold of the standards.

It was on a bright morning, when the clear air trembled in the sunlight, that the bell sounded, three strokes at first, slow, and at unequal intervals, then in a long delirious peal which floated over the city in large waves of sound, broken at each instant by the shock of bronze. All the Guilds hurried at once to meet the Friars : the Lion, the Leopard, the Tortoise; and the

Unicorn, victorious at the last games, led the way.

The little group of men in the dark brown clothing came on in a thick dust. At first they were a mere patch of colour on the whiteness of the road. But when the people of Sienna could distinguish their faces, and could see clearly the Poverello supported by Léon and leaning on a staff, all began to shout, and their voices drowned the stubborn clangour of the bell.

“ Francis ! . . . Francis !

“ O Master ! O Saint !

“ Francis ! Creature of the Lord !

“ Image of Christ !

“ Mirror of perfection !

“ Saint ! . . . Saint ! . . .

“ O scarred one, bless us !

“ O father, smile on us !

“ Bless the standards !

“ Bless the Guilds !

“ Bless the city ! . . .”

When the burst of shouting reached the Poverello, he stopped and raised his hand. Immediately silence spread over the gay-coloured crowd, which was coming down the hillside by the winding roads that lead from the town towards the plain. The men of Sienna knelt. The waving standards were lowered, and the blessing of the poor Man of Assisi passed over those bent heads, like the breeze over the rustling wheat.

Then the Friars intoned the *Chant of Creation* and moved towards the town, escorted by the Guilds. The people of Sienna in frenzy crowded round the Master. The archers tossed their oriflammes heavenwards ; which rose to a prodigious height, and then fell back eddying to the ground ; the heralds catching them in their hands

brandished them thrice round their heads, or launched them again into the air with a great rustle of silk and gold. Women fought with each other to get near the Saint. Many wept to see him so pale. Still he moved on, his head erect, as is the habit of the blind, while with all their strength his brethren had to shield him from the buffetings of the crowd. As he passed under the gate and the shouts of the people echoed against the stone walls, the Poverello had an access of weakness; he would have fallen if Orlando, with his strong arm, had not caught and supported him.

“You feel ill, Master?” he asked sorrowfully.

Francis smiled.

“I have sung so much,” he said, “that at last our sister Death has heard me. . . .

I have just seen her pass. But she has not shown me the favour to take me. . . . God will not deliver me until I have delivered thee, my brother ! . . .”

The procession, compressed within the narrow streets, filled them to overflowing with a slow-moving flood. The Poverello advanced with great difficulty. His brethren protected him from the indiscreet crowd, using their sticks freely and at hazard. As the crush increased, they suddenly decided to lift Francis on their shoulders. Thus they carried him as in triumph. The happy crowd acclaimed him. They shouted:

“ To the Church ! . . . To the Church ! ”

And the pressure of a whole people carried thither the little band of Friars, while Francis, a scarcely living relic, pale but still smiling, blessed the crowd from the height of his moving throne.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE physicians of Sienna were no more fortunate than their colleagues in other Italian cities. Francis passed several months in the little proud-walled town, which, elated by his presence, wished dimly to have the honour of his death. Messengers came from St. Mary of the Angels: they took back to their companions the blessing and remembrance of the master. When he was asked one day: "Do you forget Assisi, which loves you and calls for you?" he drew up his worn-out body with a sudden thrill.

"I do not forget her, any more than I forget my mother!" he said with emphasis. Then he added more softly:

"I am like the ant, who during the

summer economises her stores that she may live through the winter. I economise my strength for my last journey. As soon as I can, I shall go to salute my brethren and to bid them farewell."

He could not depart until the following spring. Slowly they carried him towards Assisi. He seemed to live by an effort of will. Almost always silent, he sometimes chanced to utter suddenly a few words that revealed his secret grief.

"They have robbed me of my brethren," he cried one day. "But I shall reappear among them and impose on them my rule, I shall show them that I am the master. . . ."

Then almost immediately tears rose to his eyes.

"Forgive me for my pride, O Lord! I am the meanest of Thy creatures. Only,

I pray Thee, grant me the good death that my sins have not deserved ! . . .”

When he had come near to Assisi, the whole city moved out to meet him and surrounded him, jealous of their Saint. The people no longer showed the artless joy of former days. They feared that the eternal pilgrim might depart again and make some other city illustrious by his death. They surrounded him with men-at-arms. They scarcely suffered the Clarisses and the Friars to approach him. The procession entered Assisi like prisoners, to the shouts of a victorious people. They had their Saint ! Verily they would not let him escape. He should not go and die elsewhere. Assisi would keep her relic ! . . .

While the tumultuous crowd, with the sound of trumpets and the clash of arms, was taking the Poverello to the bishop's

palace, Clara walked beside him and supported him lovingly. Orlando and Simonetta suddenly found themselves face to face : he, burnt by the glare of the highways and emaciated by Poverty, but less proud and more grave ; she, radiant with youth and confidence and hope. They looked at each other in silence and their hearts met. Francis smiled at them.

“ Simonetta, my sister, have patience ! ” he said softly.

At that moment, as they passed before San Rufino, the people of Assisi intoned in his honour the *Chant of Creation*. Francis passed up the steps of the Church, and, leaning upon Clara, joined his voice with those of his brethren. Above those hundreds of moving heads, in the mist with which his failing eyes clothed every aspect of the world, he saw, even as he sang, a

series of bright images pass like phantoms before him : the house where he was born, with its low door and threshold of stone, and his mother who bent down smiling to caress her child's brown curls ; then the young man, welcomed by the youth of Assisi, and riding about through the neighbouring territories dressed in velvet like a lord. A period of agitation followed the follies of that first youth. There was the war with Perugia, the glare of a battle on a bridge, the prison, illness : then a new enthusiasm that carried the young merchant of Assisi towards God : then heart-rending memories ; the hardness of his father, the despair of his mother, the hours of triumph. At last, Sister Clara ! . . . He turned towards her and leant on her shoulder with less constraint : the young woman gazed at him with her eyes full of

tears ; and they joined their voices, as they would have joined their love, to sing the last stanza of the Canticle :

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our mother, Earth. . .

The final notes of the chant trembled in a last wave of sound over the swaying crowd ; a brief silence followed, then the acclamations were renewed and the people escorted the Saint to the Episcopal palace.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE cold, bare palace became the heart of the Order. From the cell which he occupied, the Poverello began again to govern his empire. He felt he was dying under the vigilant eyes of the priests, but before he should disappear, he wished to impress an ineffaceable mark on his Order ; therefore he wrote to all the brethren a long letter in which he reminded them of his rules. Then he addressed himself to the Christian world at large, speaking in the name of God whose messenger he was : thus for several months, fighting against an ever-present death, he poured out over the world in full measure the dream of his life. But, even as he withdrew his uplifted hand, it lay for a moment over Assisi,

and the wearied Master performed yet another miracle of love.

A civil war was about to distract the city. On account of some trifling quarrel, the magistrate had forbidden the citizens to have any dealings with the priests, and the bishop had excommunicated the magistrate. When the Poverello heard it, he was in despair :

“ Who will listen to me,” he murmured, “ if my brethren themselves devour each other ? . . . ”

In that moment of grief the Divine Minstrel added a stanza of mercy to the *Chant of Creation* :

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for those who forgive each
 other for Thy love's sake,
 And who suffer sickness and tribulation.
 Happy are they who suffer these in patience,
 For by Thee, O Most Highest, shall they be crowned.

Then he called his brethren :

“Go to the magistrate and to the bishop, and say that I sent you. Sing to them the Canticle and these new words until their hearts are touched! . . .”

And obedient to the will of the dying man, the priest and the magistrate were reconciled in all humility. Thrilled by this victory, the Poverello saw in it the presage of the triumph of his ideal. His cell was bright with the sunshine of joy. The people of Assisi, meeting in the square, marvelled to hear the Poor Men of God sing without ceasing in the palace. Day and night the sound of choirs surrounded the Master, and the soldiers who mounted guard over his agony were astounded at this ecstasy, these songs so near to death. Each day was like his last: his will to live seemed wonderful!

At the end of the summer, however,

the Poverello had a violent crisis. Men thought the end had come at last. For several moments, surrounded by his terrified brethren, he vomited streams of blood. When the attack was over, he raised himself, and said to them in a low voice :

“ I think my sister, Death, has just stretched out to me her arms. . . . Sing me the Canticle once more ! . . . ”

They sang it ; their hearts torn with grief. At Francis' side Clara was sobbing. But when they reached the last verse, with a motion of the hand he asked for silence. Then, slowly and so softly that one could scarcely hear him, he added to the Chant of Creation the stanza of resignation :

Praise be to Thee, O Lord, for our sister, Death,
From whom no man living can escape.
Woe be to them who die in mortal sin :
But happy they who die in Thy most Holy Will,
For the second death will be sweet to them.

Then the Poor Men felt their hearts too heavy and could sing no more : kneeling with Clara, they wept beside their Master and implored him not to leave them.

Once more Death was kind, and the Poverello lived on.

The next day he said to his brethren :

“ My sister, Death, has rewarded me for singing her praise. It is not here that she will come to take me. . . . You must carry me to St. Mary of the Angels, my brethren, to the meeting-place that she has appointed ! . . . ”

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN they came out of the palace, a great silence lay over Assisi. Léon had first appeared on the threshold, sad, his eyes consumed with tears. He stood in front of the dense throng, and placed a finger on his lips. Then every sound died away. The simplest-minded understood that they must respect the agony of the Saint and felt their hearts torn with anguish. A few Friars appeared ; then the bearers, six strong men, who carried the Poverello.

Francis, stretched on a kind of bed, lay perfectly motionless, his face turned towards the sky, and so pale that but for the assurance of the doctors one would have said that he was dead. He made no movement of any kind as he traversed the crowd.

A deep and solemn murmur rose from the assembled people : it was like a mighty whisper filling the void of space. Many men wept. The women twisted their arms in silence, or stretched them forward in prayer and adoration towards him who bore the marks of Christ. The children gazed at him timidly, while the Bishop Guido, wearing his mitre, stood with clasped hands on the threshold of the palace, and prayed for the divine guest who was leaving his abode for ever. Clara walked near the Saint and saw only him. Behind them came the Friars and their companions in serried, silent ranks, like orphans in despair.

Slowly, for the roads were bad, they left the city. The men of Assisi did not dare to pass beyond the gate. They recognised that the children of the Poverello alone had the right to his last moments, and

trembling with grief, they stopped at the threshold of their town. From the gate they remained watching the waving brown of the Friars' robes among the olive trees. They could not withdraw their gaze and they feared to return to Assisi, for they had the feeling that henceforth she was a dead city, stiff in her walls of stone, and that her soul had passed out from her.

In the warmth of a golden morning the Friars went down the hill by the stony path, where the brambles grow on either side. The bushes were covered with berries full of the scent of honey: the olive trees were all starred with the little black dots of fruit, and heavy bunches of grapes hung in festoons from the vines, among the dried-up elms.

When the procession reached the plain, at the cross roads where stands the hospital

of San Salvatore, Francis made a gesture with his hand. They stopped at once.

“Where are we?” he asked in a feeble voice. “I can see no more. . . .”

“We are approaching the hospital,” replied Léon.

“Then . . . turn me towards Assisi. . . .”

The bearers turned round, and the Poverello was face to face with his native town. He could no longer see it with the eyes of the body, but with all his soul he gazed at it across the memories of his life. There it was before him, built on the side of the mountain in long parallel courses of masonry, on the pale rock that blended with it. Above to the right rose Subasio, whose softly-rounded summit rolled gently down towards it. Below, spread in a tangled mass over the brown earth parched by the long summer suns, was the profuse

but delicate foliage of the olives and the elms.

After a long silence Francis raised towards Assisi his trembling hand. In a weak, but still clear voice, he greeted her for the last time.

“Blessed be thou of the Lord, O sacred city, faithful unto God! Through thee shall many souls be saved! In thee shall dwell many servants of the Most High! From thee many elect shall go forth unto the Eternal Kingdom! . . .”

His hand fell back, and the shadow seemed again to veil his face. The procession continued its journey towards St. Mary of the Angels. When they passed under the enormous holm-oaks, whose leaves, always green, retain their freshness and their shade, Francis thrilled as his senses felt once more the perfumes of his

youth, the bitter scent of the box-trees, the smell of the earth, the subtle exhalation of the moss. He smiled and murmured :

“ Clara, my sister ! . . . Clara ! . . . Do you remember the night when you came to us? We passed down this road with torches and palms. . . . It was the sweetest moment of my life . . . Clara ! . . . I recall it at the moment of my death ! . . . ”

The young woman bent towards him : she took his hand and covered it with kisses. She did not dare to reply to the Poverello, for he could not see her tears, whereas he would have heard her sobs.

When he found himself again in his hut, its freshness and tranquility seemed to do him good. He slept peacefully and lived on for some days, always weaker, but calm and smiling. It pleased him to be always surrounded by singing. Canticles, psalms,

hymns in the vulgar tongue, lauds in the sacred language, continually resounded in the heart of the forest. Hourly the Friars repeated the *Chant of Creation*. Sometimes the Poverello would try to join in the singing: and when Clara said to him: "You exhaust your strength. . . . Be careful, my brother! . . ." he would answer:

"I have passed my life in singing to the Glory of God. I must die still singing it."

Marvellously lucid up to the last moment, he knew with certainty the hour of his death. It was the third day of October when he understood that the moment had come. With a gesture he called his companions around him.

"Stretch me on the ground!" he said. "I am a humble Minstrel. . . . I have Poverty for my spouse. . . . I must die on the ground."

Weeping, they obeyed him, and stretched him on the beaten soil, his face turned towards the door, whence glided in, with the last rays of the setting sun, the murmur of the woods. He was silent for a moment, then with a feeble voice he called :

“ Orlando . . . Simonetta. . . .”

Both of them, their hearts torn with anguish, knelt near him.

“ Orlando . . . my brother . . .” he murmured, “ . . and you, Simonetta, my little sister . . . I release you from the bonds of the Order. . . . By your long sufferings you are freed from the past. . . . God allows you to love each other ! . . .”

He placed his failing hands on their bent heads. The two young people wept, overcome with grief and joy.

“ May those whom I have offended forgive me ! . . .” he said again.

Then he raised his hand and blessed his brethren.

“ Sing ! ”

Almost in a whisper they intoned the *Chant of Creation*. Francis had let his hand fall in that of Clara, and now he turned towards her his dying eyes in the effort to see her again. He remained motionless, scarcely breathing, as he pressed, with all the strength still left to him, the hand of his companion, while the chant brought to his last moments the homage of that creation which he had loved so well.

When the Friars uttered the sublime verse :

Praise be to thee, O Lord, for our sister, Death ! . . .

the Poverello drew himself up. An expression of joy shone on his face. He stretched out his arms as though to embrace

a dear friend, then he fell back, as the sun disappeared behind the summits of the mountains.

Death had passed.

APPENDIX.

INCIPIUNT LAUDES CREATURARUM
QUAS FECIT BEATUS FRANCISCUS AD LAUDEM ET
HONOREM DEI
CUM ESSET INFIRMUS AD SANCTUM DAMIANUM.

Pages 231, 232.

Altissimu, omnipotente, bon Signore
Tue so' le laude la gloria e l'onore et onne benedictione
Ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano
Et nullo homo ene dignu te mentovare.

Laudato sie, mi Signore, cum tucte le tue creature
Spetialmente messor lo frate sole,
Lo quale jorna, et allumini per lui :
Et ellu è bellu e radiante, cum grande splendore :
De te, Altissimo, porta significatione.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora luna e le stelle :
In celu l'ài formate clarite et pretiose et belle.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per frate vento
Et per aere, et nubilo et sereno et onne tempo,
Per le quale a le tue creature dai sustentamento.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per sor acqua,
La quale è multo utile et humele et pretiosa et casta.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per frate focu,
Per lo quale enallumini la nocte,
Ed ello è bello et jucundo et robustoso et forte.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra matre terra,
La quale ne sustenta et governa
Et produce diversi fructi con coloriti fiori et herba.

Laudate et benedicete mi Signore et ringratiate,
Et serviteli cum grande humilitate.

Page 256.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per quilli ke perdonano per
lo tuo amore
Et sostengono infirmitate et tribulatione,
Beati quilli ke sosterrano in pace,
Ka da te, altissimo, sirano incoronati.

Page 258.

Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra morte cor-
porale
De la quale nullu homo vivente po skappare :
Guai a quilli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali !
Beati quilli ke se trovera ne le tue sanctissime volun-
tate
Ka la morte secunda nol farrà male.

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